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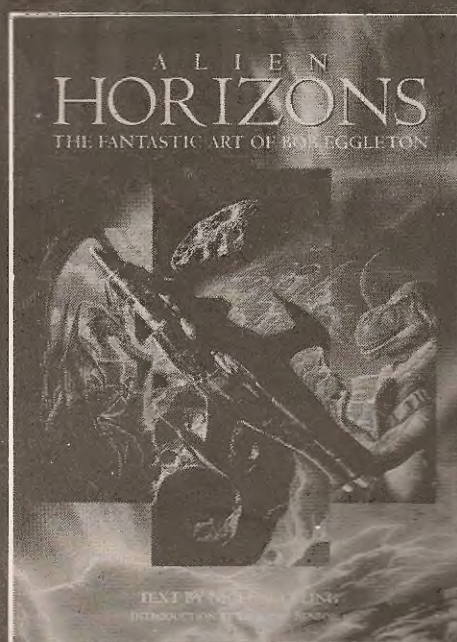
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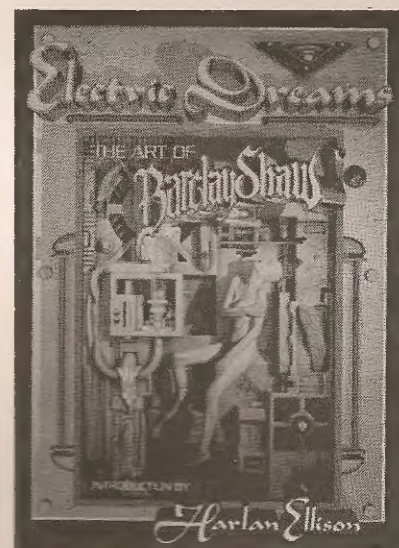
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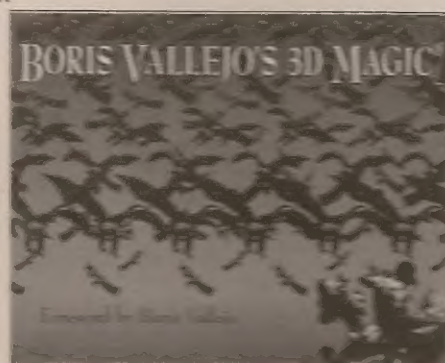
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March 1996

105

science fiction & fantasy

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Cover by David Hardy – Mars ships leave Earth orbit.

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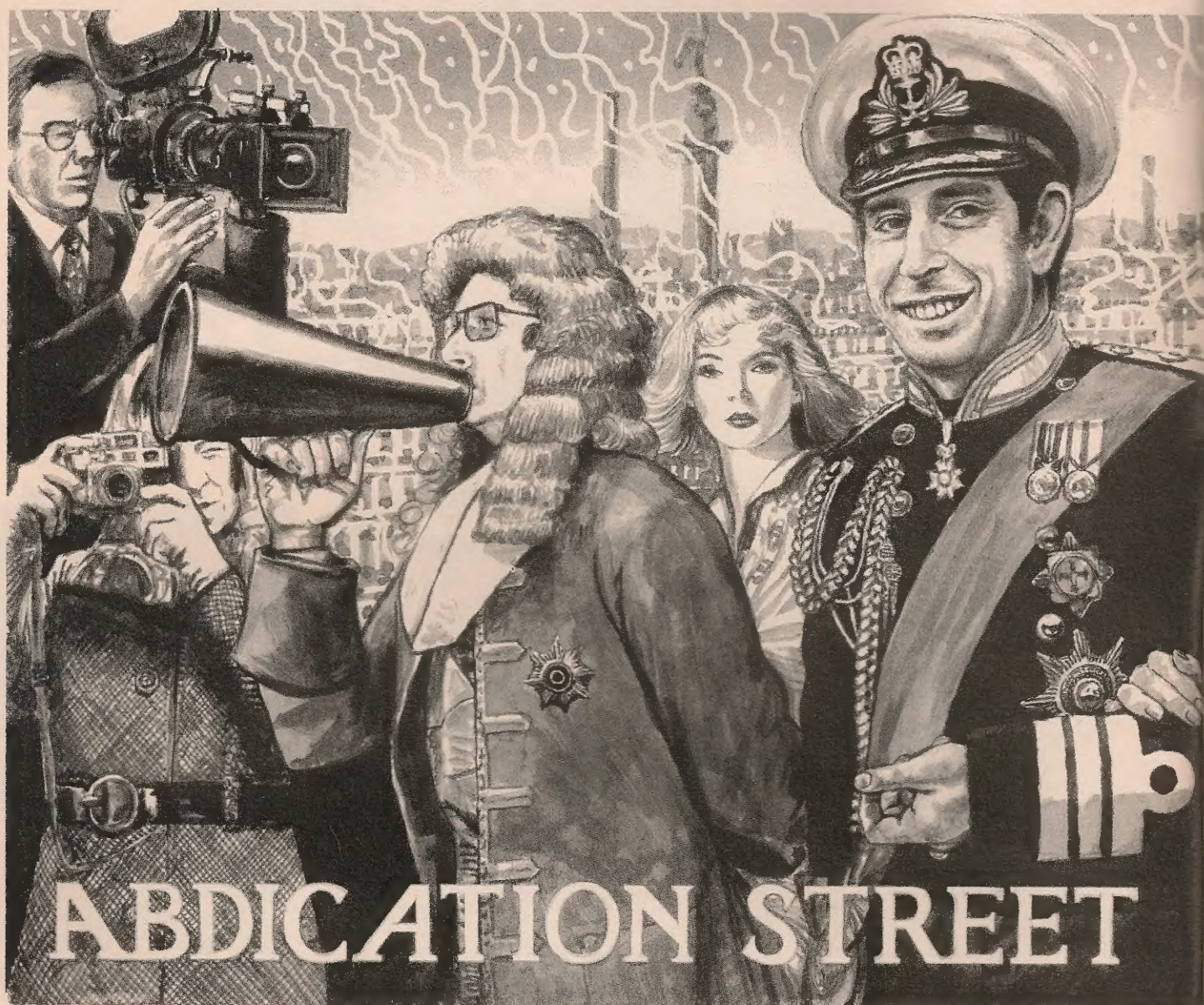
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“Perfect place to plot,” commented Isaac Judaiovich as they were admitted into the Happy Guys Club, “this nest of parasites, old guard, *nouveau* money, witless younger sons, yankee reds, perfumed exquisites and mad Jews. We Russians love to plot, Cinzia. I scry this was where they plotted to sack poor Georgi.”

Though it was early, the function room was athrong with fashionably-dressed writers, actresses, poets, and wireless and televisniks. Cinzia Davidovna Bronstein saw a lot of silver lipstick mouths and silver foil mini-dresses. All the men had hair down to their bums, Tartar plaits threaded with ceramic beads.

Half the people at the party were drunk. Customarily first to the bar, the guest of honour was *very* drunk. Three quarters of an hour ago, on the early news, Georgi Sanders was noticeably squiffy as he quoted Duma leader Kissinger’s latest denials.

Nineteen seventy-two had not so far been a good year for Old Russia. Maybe 1973 would be better. She should ask Isaac. He was supposed to be the seer.

“It’s a marvel ITV were satisfied with giving the old soak his cards,” Isaac muttered to her through a long-range rictus of ingratiating directed at programme

planners across the room. The grin disturbed his fiercely generous sideburns and set *payesses* jiggling under the rim of his conical cabbalist cap. “Something permanent with poison would be more in the style of our new masters.”

Georgi, news anchor for as long as she could remember, was staggering, unable to coordinate his long body, dark vodka spots on his electric blue velvet evening jacket. In the centre of the room, he held court for the last time. After tonight, it was off to Siberia or into the library with a bottle and a bullet.

“I’m wrong,” said Isaac. “The decision to axe Georgi would have been taken at a much higher level.”

“At a board meeting?” said Cinzia.

“No my dear, at the highest level. *Batiushka*.”

“The Tsar?” she whispered.

“He’s majority shareholder in ITV. There was a time when politicians could have stopped him, but the Duma are tearing themselves to bits over Indochina and the scandals.”

Isaac arranged fingers against his forehead and fluttered his eyes shut, as he did on tele before uttering his popular predictions.

“I foresee that Nicholas III will wrestle the Duma.



Illustrations by Gerry Grace

Kim Newman & Eugene Byrne

He dreams of winning back the power Nicholas Alexandrovich had to give up in 1916."

A young man in a white polo neck kaftan and sparkly smoked glasses wound through the revellers towards them. Before he could speak, Isaac flung out a hand to fend him off.

"This is Harlan," he said. "He's supposed to be a cultural attaché, but everybody knows he's a spy."

The American was devastated by Isaac's perception.

"Just because I'm from the USSA doesn't mean I can't be a swinger, Ike."

"Ike!" Isaac spat, delighted with disgust. "Ike! Harlan is a godless communist barbarian for all his democratic hipster threads. Admit it, you come here for the secrets."

"All the best *girlchiks* are here, comrade citizen."

Harlan was looking at Cinzia over his silly spectacles.

"Are you a model, sister?"

She didn't have to have cabbalist powers of insight to recognize that for flannel.

"Make-up girl, actually. With this lighting, I'd use Number 5."

"Cinzia has no secrets, Harlan."

"Nichevo," the American mispronounced. He was

distracted, eyes pulled to one side.

Cinzia turned. A ballerina was walking by in a backless dress, a face painted in red on her elegant shoulderblades, blind eyes rolling over taut back muscles.

Harlan was off in pursuit.

"Is he really a spy?"

Isaac smiled mystically, losing his hands in the sleeves of his symbol-spotted robe.

"The United Socialist States of America doesn't have a culture, so what would be the point of a cultural attaché?"

"He doesn't seem like one of those ascetic Caponists."

"He's been corrupted. That's Petrograd for you. Varoomshka is the mistress of Admiral Beria. Bound to be with SMERSH."

Harlan tried to French kiss the small of the ballerina's back. She turned in his drunken embrace, showing predatory teeth, and dragged him onto the tiny dance-floor. They spasmed about in an attempt at the new French dance, *le Bompe*.

"Interesting people you meet in this business."

Television was not her first choice career. She had wanted to be a doctor, but abandoned college for a

saxophone player. Now, at 23, she was a paint-slapper for Imperial Television. She had not stopped telling herself it was temporary.

Applause exploded from the main door. Someone special must have entered to make the glamorous people of Petrograd's closed little world of tele abandon their normal collective pose of languid boredom.

It was Brynner, striding in baggy trousers, soft leather boots and immaculately-cut *moujik* smock. Though it was spring, he had a heavy military coat draped over his shoulders. Nobody knew quite how much the coat was an affectation; the star wanted to fight in Indochina, and had volunteered to take the place of a conscript soldier. The army turned him down as too old, but he continued to wear the coat.

"I predict Yul will have a shock at the next script meeting."

"Why's that?" Cinzia asked.

Brynner carried himself like a king. There was authority in everything he did. Now he held out his hand, never looking away from Sanders, and someone placed a glass in it. He was famous as Prince Bolkon-sky in *The Rostovs*, ITV's most successful beet opera.

"Because Natasha's going to go by August."

"Mother will be devastated. She always says Natasha's not really a bitch, just misunderstood."

"That's as may be, but the board just looked at Talia Gurdin's demand for a pay hike and have decided Tasha Rostova is going to be kidnapped by a flying samovar and returned to Earth as a disfigured hag. A chin-dimpled plastic surgeon played by Issur Demsky will reconstruct her in the likeness of a more affordable actress who happens to be mistress of the Head of Quality Drama."

"But that's ridiculous!"

"Cinzia Davidovna, it's no more ridiculous than anything else that happens in *The Rostovs*. Remember when everyone was assassinated by anarchists but it turned out to be Natasha's dream? Nothing in tele is real. The more unreal it is, the more the people like it."

Isaac Judaiovch was difficult: always complaining, usually patronising, probably a lech. But it wasn't all charlatanry: he really could see the future. In cab-balist robes, he was presenter of ITV's top-rated gruel-time show, *It's Your Fate*. He began with a mystic weather forecast, ran through everyone's horoscopes and read tarot for guest celebrities to whom he was spectacularly rude ("I see you in the future," he had told Peter Ustinov, "entering your *anecdote*"). He used means occult and mathematical to try to predict winning lottery numbers. He had never yet been right, but millions believed in his guidance. His strongest suit was predicting the career reversals of politicians and the romantic down-turns of film stars. Much of it came from sitting in the Happy Guys Club and listening. If you needed gossip, Isaac Judaiovich had it.

"What will Brynner do?" she asked.

"Go back to the *kinos*. He's signed up for a cossack picture in which he leads a band of mercenaries in saving a poor village from a band of marauding Chechens."



At the far end of the room, by the tall windows, gathered a drunken mainly male group. Ilya Kuriakin, the game show host, was at its centre. A scar-faced lad

hauled a revolver out of his kaftan.

"*Bozhe moi!*" exclaimed Isaac, foreseeing trouble.

The gun-owner spun the chamber and handed it over. Kuriakin drunkenly waved the revolver around, an extremely effective way of getting elbow-room. He sat on a velvet-upholstered chair, and, gripping the weapon with both hands, held the barrel against his rainbow-pattern left boot about where his big toe would be. The room fell silent as Kuriakin squinted down, tongue sticking out as he tried to focus through vodka fog. The hammer clicked against an empty chamber. Everyone cheered. Kuriakin bowed, spun the chamber and handed the gun to another man.

Kuriakin was another tele personality, presenter of *Russian Roulette*. Ordinary people came on and spun a giant mock-up revolver. If they got an "empty chamber" they won a fortune. If they got the "bullet", they had to give all they owned, down to their children's toys, to charity.

Bloody silly, really.

"Cinzia, you look troubled," Isaac said.

"Nothing's wrong," she said.

Apart from the fact that she had no chance of getting back into medical school unless Mother won the lottery or her brother got a job. The odds of winning the lottery were 18 million to one. A better bet than Vladimir getting a job.

"Nothing's wrong, child," Isaac pronounced, "but nothing's right either."

"*Nichevo*," she shrugged. Lousy job, few prospects. She was off men, too.

The seer took an empty ashtray and scooped melt-water from an ice-bucket. Sacramentally, he put the ashtray on the table.

"Take my hands," said the seer, "and we'll penetrate the veil of the future."

Yeah, sure, she thought, giving him her hands anyway.

"Now look into the water. What do you see?"

An ashtray full of water.

Isaac stared intently. His face reddened and veins in his temples throbbed as though he were suffering from constipation, yet his hands grasped hers gently.

"You will marry a prince," he said, matter-of-factly. "I know you don't believe me and I don't blame you. But sometimes, just sometimes, I see things so clearly you could almost be watching tele. Cinzia Davidovna, before this year's leaves have fallen, you will be married to a man who is wealthy, kind, dignified and courageous beyond words. And a Prince."

She laughed. He laughed. She leaned over and kissed him. "You are too kind, Isaac Judaiovich."

He shrugged. "You'll see."

Cologne stung her nostrils as someone oozed into a free space by their table. A hand settled on her shoulder.

"Prince Yussupov, what a pleasure," lied Isaac as the new newscaster sat next to them. The Prince

didn't take his hand off her shoulder.

"You dirty old dog, Asimov," said Prince Felix Dimitrovich Yussupov, looking at her as if she were a plate of strawberries in honey. "Who's your charming young friend?"

"Prince Yussupov, may I introduce Cinzia Davidovna Bronstein."

"Are you a good little Jewish girl, Cinzia Davidovna, or might we be fortunate enough to assume you consort with *goyim*?"

The Prince was in his late 20s, six-feet-something tall, built like an Olympic athlete. His blonde hair was permed, his flared jeans and jacket were of fashionably-distressed *fabric de Nimes*, and his cheese-cloth shirt was open at the chest to reveal a cultivated thatch of hair and a gold icon with an inset diamond the size of a quail's egg.

"It depends," she said.

"On what?" said the Prince.

"Whether he's a *mensch* or a *schmuck*."

"You have beautiful cheekbones. I would very much like to get to know you better."

"Why? I'm a Jewish make-up girl. You're a newsreader with a title. If those magazines my mother is always reading are to be believed you own about a fifth of Russia, as well as stretches of the Ukraine, Siberia and the Crimea ..."

"You forget Georgia, Tadzikistan and a golf course in Scotland. I own the highest mountain in the Crimea. It was given to my grandmother as a birthday present. Would you care for it? You are pretty. You could have pretty things."

"Like a mountain? I suppose you'd marry me, *hein*? Would you like having a Jewish mother-in-law? With all the things you own, why do you want to be a newsreader?"

He grinned as he lit a Sobranje with his flip-top Fabergé. "Because I want to be loved, and I'd love you to love me."

She laughed. "I can't possibly love you!"

"Whyever not?"

"Because I would have to admire and respect you. You'd have to prove your physical and moral courage, you'd have to be kind to children and animals and the poor. Tell you what: if you donate ten million roubles to the Petrograd Free Hospital, I'll let you take me to dinner."

"You're the most expensive whore I've ever met! You fascinate me, Cinzia Davidovna."

His hand was in her hair again. She shook it free.

"Shall I tell you something even more fascinating? Isaac Judaiovich has just been scrying the future. He tells me I am to marry a prince. It could be you, Felix Dimitrovich Yussupov, but I wouldn't sleep with you unless you gave away all your property to the poor. We could live comfortably on your newsreader's salary. My mother would have to live with us, of course."

He stubbed out his cigarette, bored. "I suppose a quick fuck in the carriage park's out of the question then?"

She nodded.

He got up. "I'll see you again, Cinzia Davidovna. Cheerio, Asimov."

The newsreader strode off, jacket flouncing *en*

pelisse.

"You should be mindful of him," said Isaac. "He's dangerous. Self-preservation should be your first law. Yussupoff is not above getting you jumped in a back alley and flown to some distant *dacha*."

"Then I'd have to hammer a tent-peg into his eye."

"You would too. You're quite a girl, Cinzia. You'd make a man very happy or very miserable. Nothing in between."

She raised her glass. "Here's to my prince. Just as long as it isn't Yussupov."

There was another flurry at the door. Middle-aged men marched in, handing coats to the ushers. At first sight, they did not belong in this gathering of glamorous and good-looking. Their boxy 1950s clothes suggested influence rather than fame. Cinzia recognized two television producers and a Member of the Duma. Among them was an unfamiliar face, a dignified, fastidious-looking type in an immaculate suit. He was obviously European, but the immense distance between his nose and top lip suggested something more exotic.

One of the producers spotted Isaac, waved, and ushered the strange-looking man towards their table.

Isaac stood and shook the producer's hand. "Bondarchuk! So you've come to Georgi's wake! Will you join us? May I introduce Cinzia Davidovna."

"Oh, I know Cinzia. She's covers Georgi's vodka-blossoms," said Bondarchuk, taking her outstretched hand and kissing it. He was a little too old and formal to shake it. "Normally we have make-up girls, but Cinzia Davidovna is a make-up *artist*."

Bondarchuk pulled up a chair for his guest. "Permit me to introduce Sir Anthony Blunt. Personal assistant to the Dowager Duchess of York. He has come from London to help with the imperial wedding."

Sir Anthony nodded curtly. Because of her fluent English, Cinzia was assigned to work double shifts during the wedding story. She supposed she should be grateful.

Sir Anthony was about to sit down when he noticed one of the pictures. A framed 1920s Rodchenko poster, advertising baby pacifiers. THERE HAVE NEVER BEEN SUCH GOOD DUMMIES! SUCK 'EM 'TIL YOU'RE OLD! The Englishman took a closer look while Bondarchuk whistled up champagne.

Blunt moved further along the wall to some Lissitzky posters for Red Wedge beer, and more Rodchenkos, with the pithy slogans by Mayakovsky. The Happy Guys Club was decorated almost exclusively with the products of "Advertisement Constructors, Mayakovsky-Rodchenko."



When Sir Anthony was out of earshot, Bondarchuk leaned his head towards Isaac and the table. "Isaac Judaiovich, humour this fish. He's a courtier straight out of the *ancien regime*. I've baby-sat him all day and I'd pay two years' salary to see him guillotined."

Sir Anthony sat down next to her. She smiled at him. He ignored her and eyed the champagne disdainfully.

Bondarchuk continued talking to them, smiling and nodding at his guest, "This prick Blunt doesn't want

any of the engagement and wedding to be on tele in the first place. He's worried that it interferes with the monarchical dignity of the occasion. It's okay Isaac, he doesn't speak a word of Russian. Dignity of the monarchy! Who's madder, Nicky or his sainted Edward VIII?"

Cinzia spoke to Sir Anthony in English, "you are interested in advertising, Sir Anthony?"

"No, I am interested in art. Rodchenko intrigues me. Idealistic and brutal at the same time. One cannot help but feel that his talents would have been better employed by a totalitarian regime."

From the corner of her eye she saw Bondarchuk nudging Isaac in the ribs.

"Do you not think, Sir Anthony, that some advertising aspires to art?"

"Much great art was produced to glorify a wealthy patron. Advertising is the same, but the patron is a corporation. Charles I favoured Van Dyck because he made him look like a king."

"So now," she said, rubbing the lip of her glass with her finger, carefully avoiding Sir Anthony's eye, "our Tsar wants tele to take up the brush of Van Dyck."

Isaac, she knew, spoke English. So, she assumed, did Bondarchuk. Both looked into the air, pursing lips, nodding as though she had said something wise.

Sir Anthony looked at her. "Your English is very good. Almost accentless. Are you British?"

"My mother was."

"The medium is neutral, whether paint or a cathode ray tube. What matters is the way in which the medium is employed. Van Dyck did not paint Charles stuffing his face with fowl, or scratching his fleas, or sitting on the commode. From what little I know, Russian television is solely interested in royalty on the commode."

"Bondarchuk, that's a great idea!" said Isaac. "I could interview people on the crapper... just a little cabalist humour."

Sir Anthony's disapproval was jarred by a feedback whine. "Weepy" Krasnevin, Director of Current Affairs Broadcasting, had picked up the microphone and was waiting for silence. Quiet came, but was instantly interrupted by a click and relief as someone else in Kuriakin's group didn't shoot his toes off.

"My friends," said Krasnevin, eyes dribbling crocodile tears, "this is a sad day for us all."

Except Prince Yussupov, she thought.

"Georgi Sanders is, one might say, a giant. He is the little father of Russian current affairs broadcasting. His voice carried us through the dark days of the Great Patriotic War, the Alsace-Lorraine missile crisis, the assassination of Premier Smoktunovsky. You must all join me in wishing him the best for the future..."

Everyone clapped and cheered, banged fists on tables, stamped on the floor as Georgi bounded onto the low stage. Krasnevin, who had schemed for years to be rid of the newscaster, sobbed deeply and embraced the man he had just fired.

Cinzia saw the slightly smelly, bum-grasping salon snake she had sometimes thickly powdered, but recalled the suave, clear-sighted Sanders of wartime wireless and '50s television. The first Russian newsman to penetrate Capone's America. His sarcasm had been the single greatest factor in derailing the hyster-

ical anti-red pogroms of Ayn Rand. And he had tricked ITV into broadcasting footage taken amid the bloody shambles of the Duma's Indochinese police action.

Georgi bowed to his audience, but did not smile.

Krasnevin took a carriage clock in the shape of Misha the Prime Time Bear from an impossibly beautiful girl and shoved it at Georgi. Between gales of tears, he gabbled about "a small token of our affection."

Georgi's lip curled. He swayed as though on the deck of a Baltic steamer in a bracing wind. He took the mike.

"I asked for a Fabergé egg full of cocaine, but you got me a fucking clock."

"It's solid gold you ungrateful old bastard!" shouted Yussupoff.

Georgi bit into one of Misha's huge ears.

"So it is. Well, I'm touched. No, really I am."

There was an uncomfortable silence as Georgi carefully laid the Misha clock down on the floor, with more concern for his dignity than the clock's safety.

"Most careers end in tears and mine is one of them. I don't really want to go because I know retirement will bore me to suicide."

A huge monitor on a big wooden stand was wheeled towards the stage by minions.

"I hope you're looking forward to tele with *pedigree*. All the news the Tsar will own up to, read by pretty boys with lineages back to the Tartar bum chums of Peter the Great. As a farewell, I'd like to show you some film not broadcast on the orders of our magnificent emperor. A last taste of the sort of thing you won't be seeing on tele for a long time."

Everyone was listening now. Cinzia half-expected the Okhrana to burst in and arrest Georgi for sedition. Georgi signalled, and minions worked the machines.

"Can someone get the lights?"

The room went dark and chairs were turned towards the front, glasses were refilled, spectacles discreetly fished from inside pockets.

"Go on Illya," said someone, "a last time. Double or quits."

The screen came to light, first a fuzzy grey snow-storm, then bars.

There was a deafening discharge, screeches, a yelp of manly pain. Sir Anthony cringed as if he was the one the revolver had been shot at.

Brynnner said, "get an ice-bucket, put the toe in it and take him to the hospital. The new Chinese surgeon might be able to sew it back on."

Onscreen: a pockmarked landscape with no vegetation. It looked like a far-Eastern desert, except the sky was completely black. Two figures bounced into view, encumbered by bulbous pressure suits.

"*Bozhe moi!*" said Bondarchuk.

Everyone knew what this was. In July 1969, the Imperial Space Programme culminated with the lunar expedition. Count Rennenkampf and Count Ignatieff had died in the crash-landing of the *Star of Russia* and been hailed as heroes of the motherland. But there were rumours that the landing had been successful and the cosmonauts perished later in some terrible manner that had been hushed up.

"*This is Baikonur, talk to us, excellencies,*" crackled

the soundtrack.

– bleep –

Cinzia heard wild tales that the cosmonauts had been eaten by some fabulous monster out of the Strugatsky paperbacks her brother read.

"No hospital," said Kuriakin. "This I have to see."

"Baikonur, this is Baikonur. Respectfully, talk to us, excellencies. Your wireless is not down."

She recognized Valentin Bondarenko, Russia's first-ever cosmonaut and Director of the Space Programme.

The Counts bounded around the lunar desert, light as children's balloons.

"This is Baikonur, excellencies. You are making us all look extremely foolish."

No reply.

Another voice: "Velikovsky here. If you two titled pricks don't start acting like cosmonauts, I'll..."

Finally, from one of the lunar explorers: "You'll do what, Jew?" – bleep! –

Immanuel Velikovsky was President of the Bureau of Space Exploration. He had single-handedly built it from government department to semi-public corporation. When the Duma wanted to cut its funding to spare taxpayers' purses in an election year, Velikovsky enlisted private money by creating corporations to exploit spinoffs from space research, from technology through to television rights. Not one of these companies was in profit. Shareholders tended to be Strugatsky fans, people who believed they might be fabulously rich in 30 years' time, and the Imperial family. The Tsar had gained enormous influence over the space programme.

"I'll see to it you are disgraced and sent to Siberia, your estates sequestered, your farms burned, your first-born slain..."

One cosmonaut picked up a spade. The other picked up an Imperial flag that had been planted in grey lunar soil.

"Stop this at once!" – bleep!

"You don't understand. You're a commoner, a Jew. Honour means nothing to you. In the capsule, Count Michael insulted my family. Honour must be satisfied."

They faced one another like medieval warriors about to do single combat.

"You're going to fight a duel? The first men on the moon spend ten minutes walking around, then kill one another! Has the journey driven you both mad!"

– bleep! –

The two faced off, neither moving.

"Couldn't you kill each other when you get back? I want to push back the frontiers of knowledge, to build a future in space, and you behave like Neanderthals. Bondarenko, get us a link to Tsarskoye Selo, maybe Batiushka can talk sense to these fuckwits."

– bleep! –

The one with the flagstaff had a longer reach. He lunged at the one with the spade, who parried the blow easily. Using weapons in the moon's atmosphere was like fighting underwater.

The Tsar, with his newly-acquired interest in outer space, insisted cosmonauts on prestige missions be aristocrats. Any glory they earned – even death – would reflect well on the monarchy, on the old, pre-

democracy system.

The one with the spade landed a blow on the helmet of his opponent, to no effect. The latter dropped his flagstaff and tried to close with the spade-man.

They wrestled for brief seconds and pulled hoses from their bulky back-packs. They parted and struggled to re-connect the hoses, but neither could reach far enough behind his back. That they could help one another seemed not to occur to them. After half a minute, they came together again, and lay down, holding hands. Both bodies convulsed a little.

Velikovsky was emotional. "Twelve billion roubles. Twelve billion roubles we've spent on this. The Duma will impale us when they see this! Imperial Majesty, I respectfully resign!"

– Bleep! –

"Can someone get the lights?" said Georgi.

The lights came on again. Something over 200 men and women sat or stood in stunned silence. Sir Anthony was blinking, bewildered. Asimov's face was in his hands. Harlan, glasses off, was goggling: if he was a spy, he had stumbled onto a genuine secret.

"The space programme is on ice until air force officers with no breeding whatsoever can be trained," said Georgi, picking up his clock. "Illya, care for another round? I have a bauble I can wager. Chuck me that revolver, there's a good little game-show host."



"Now the De Havilland Comet of the King's Flight of the Royal Air Force touches down at

Catherine the Great Airport, here in Petrograd on this glorious spring afternoon and as the great crowd assemble here to get their first glimpse of the Duke of Cornwall. Some people suggested that since the Duke is an officer in the Royal Navy he should have arrived by sea, but he didn't. And here is the aircraft now taxiing towards the apron. And there's the little man with the orange table-tennis bats signalling to the plane. Left a bit, right a bit, forwards a bit. I understand from Airport Director Gromyko that they bought him a brand new pair of orange table-tennis bats for the occasion. This must be a proud moment for him. He would normally spend his time making signals to tourists and businessmen, the occasional diplomat, no doubt, perhaps the odd ballet personality. This is surely the only time he has made signals to a plane carrying the future husband of a Princess of the Imperial family, and probably the next King of England. A very proud moment for him indeed."

Cinzia sat cross-legged on the sofa next to her mother watching television. They drank tea in the English style, with milk and the sugar stirred in. Cinzia was taking it easy. Today would probably be the last day off she would have for several weeks. Thanks to the Duke of Cornwall.

Her mother kept pushing her spectacles back onto the bridge of her nose, so she wouldn't miss a moment. She affected not to be impressed by the imperial carnival but was at heart an obsessive monarchist. Cinzia's late father joked that once she lost her religion, royalty was the only magic left to her.

"Now, as the aircraft's mighty engines die down, the steps are wheeled up to the door. And there are the men getting ready to roll out the red carpet, a detachment of the Preobrazhensky Guards, lining up on either side. Magnificent green uniforms, red facings. Boots as well. Bayonets glistening in the sun. For state occasions like this, each soldier has to polish his boots for a total of 15 hours."

Mother was tense with excitement. It was unfair to sneer. She didn't have much pleasure in her life. She had met David Leonovich Bronstein while he was stationed in England during the War, and had come to Petrograd as a "cossack bride" in 1946. His health was affected by a wound sustained in Normandy, and he never progressed beyond junior civil servant. Being the son of a once-notorious seditionist circus clown had probably not helped him either.

Mother had to get by on a meagre pension and her job as an office-cleaner. Now Cinzia was earning, things were better, but Cinzia's brother was still a dependent. All lived in a three-room apartment in Gorokhovaya Street.

"And now, the door on the aircraft opens, and ..."

The floor shook, noise erupted through the whole building, the shattering blare of an electric guitar. Cinzia put down her tea and leapt from the sofa.

She rushed straight into Vladimir's room. He sat on the edge of his bed, eyes closed in artistic ecstasy, hacking chords out of his guitar. She fell to her knees and furiously yanked the amplifier plug from the socket.

"Hey!" he said.

"Mother is trying to watch tele," she said evenly. "Later she will walk three miles to work. She will not take the tram because she wants to save the fare. And all so she can keep you in cigarettes and clothes. I think a tiny consideration would be in order."

Vladimir shrugged. "What's she watching? The parasites flying in from London to gorge themselves on the sweat of the Russian people?"

"Why don't you save mixed metaphors for your songs, Vladi? You parrot them all from grandfather's old routines. If we're talking about parasites I suggest you take a good look in the mirror. You contribute nothing to the household budget. You don't even have the decency to go off and live in a commune."

Vladimir snorted. "*Girlichik*, you've bought the System in a big way. Times are changing. The people are waking: the 'Chine, corrupt politicians, subject races wanting freedom. There's a revolution coming, baby."

"Just postpone the revolution until Mother's had a couple of hours rest and cheap pleasure."

"Mother needs educating, *girlichik*. She's buying this whole ridiculous reactionary peepshow. She must know this is the last desperate play of a System with no future."

"Some other time, Vladi. Otherwise the Petrograd Military District gets an anonymous letter alleging that the medical certificate which rendered Vladimir Davidovich Bronstein unfit for military service is a forgery."

"I object to participating in the imperialist war in Indochina on grounds of conscience."

"Conscience? Hah! Here's the deal, Vladi. First, you stop smoking *bhang* here. Secondly, you stop abusing

your guitar when Mother is in the house. They can hear you from the Fontanka Canal. If you don't, someone tells the Army they ought to get you re-examined."

She hadn't seen Vladimir look so rattled since she first beat him at chess. For all that, he tucked the plectrum into the strings of his guitar and lay back on his bed. On the poster behind him, Ernesto "Che" Guevara – the pro-American guerilla killed fighting a Revolution in Angola – stared resolutely ahead into a bright new dawn of international socialism, managing perfectly well without Vladimir's help.

Cinzia returned to the living-room.

"As you know, protocol forbids senior members of the Imperial family from being present here to meet the Duke. The formal meeting will take place tomorrow. And as the Duke comes down the steps, two girls in traditional costume come to greet him with the traditional bread and salt."

"Look, there he is," said Mother, pointing to the tele. At the top of the steps to the aircraft, a young man of medium build stood wearing a dark blue overcoat belted with gold braid. His white-topped peaked cap didn't disguise ears that stuck out like the doors of a taxi-cab.

"Not exactly handsome."

"I suppose not," said Mother. "But he's brave. He flew helicopters in Indochina. And he's clever as well. Until the war, he was studying to be an architect. He'll probably have to give up his studies to concentrate on duties of state."

Cinzia knew the feeling. She could have carried on at medical school, but after Father died, the scholarship wouldn't stretch far enough. She'd had to get a job.

"And coming to greet the Duke is Felix Dimitrovich Yussupov. Viewers will have noticed Prince Felix, the new newsreader on ITV, is dressed strangely, all in white. This is the uniform of a cricket-player. Prince Yussupov is a great lover of English culture. He in fact owns an estate in Scotlandshire. He told me this morning that he would wear the traditional cricketing costume to make the Duke feel at home. And there's the Duke now shaking his hand. And that's the Duke's uncle, the Earl of Balham, standing by them. He finds something immensely amusing. Perhaps Prince Yussupov has said something witty."

"That man," said Mother pointing to Prince Yussupov, "is a clown."

"I know, Mother."

"You've met him?"

"Yes."

She shook her head and smiled. "It's funny. I think of television as full of intelligent, witty, good-looking people. And my own little girl sees them every day. Will you meet the Duke and Grand Duchess Ekaterina?"

"Possibly. More likely, I'll be making up courtiers and military officers. Everyone else in the department will fight one another to do the high hats."

"Now they're inspecting the Guard of Honour, and... Oh, the Earl of Balham is looking at their rifles, and looking under their caps, shouting at some of them, and the Duke is giving him a stern look. The Earl was a famous entertainer in his country before he married the Duke's Aunt Margaret."

"Isaac Asimov read my future for me last night. I'm going to marry a prince."

"Asimov read your future? In person? Gosh!"

"I have to go, Mother. I promised I'd do an extra shift at the Free Hospital."

She got up to get ready. Mother might struggle to support her deadbeat brother, but Bronsteins didn't go without light and heat in winter, they had enough to eat and a colour tele. Many in Petrograd were worse off; sooner or later, they all ended up in the Free Hospital.

"The piece of wood the Prince is holding is made of seasoned English willow, by the way. It's called a Marylebone Cricket Club."



The staff assembled in the canteen at Broadcasting House at eight a.m. for a final briefing with Paradjanov, Producer-in-Chief of the wedding coverage. Cinzia sat with the drivers, secretaries and electricians. ITV was assigning

130 personnel to the project and would broadcast an average three hours a day of coverage for the next month until the grand climax, the wedding itself.

Paradjanov, a bearded wrestler with green eye make-up and rouge-spotted cheeks, wore an eye-abusing orange-red Georgian robe. His huge lapels glinted, fragments of coloured glass and mirror woven into the fabric. He looked like Misha the Prime Time Bear ready for an evening in the nearest exquisite bar.

"Today," Paradjanov began, "three crews will go to the Winter Palace, which is opening for the Grand Imperial Ball this evening. This is where the Duke and the Grand Duchess supposedly meet for the first time. As you know, the pair have met on at least one previous occasion but the purpose of this event is to give the pond-scum a fairy tale. Every fool knows this is an old-fashioned dynastic marriage, but I want you to sell the fantasy. Eyes meet across the sumptuous room... They are introduced... They dance, they fall in love! Flop gauze over the lenses! Smear petroleum jelly over everything! Fluttering silk scarves the length of a football pitch! My partners in dissolution, I want this to be the most romantic evening Russia has choked on since the Tsarevich Alexei Nicolaevich died on his wedding night at the Livadia Palace in 1925, spluttering blood among the vines and the heavy scent of summer flowers overlooking the sea.

"One more crew will cover the route from the Antchikov Palace to the Winter Palace. Another will be stationed at the Antchikov, where the British and Russian parties are preparing themselves for this evening.

"One last thing, rose-petals. It is my impression that after weeks of briefings, many of you sluggards *still* don't know who the Duke of Cornwall is. This is unacceptable. For the last time, he is a nephew of King Edward VIII. Even real dim-bulbs remember Edward nearly lost his throne in 1936 because of his marriage to a White Yank divorcée. Remember the mini-series and Grand Duchess Anastasia's book? The upshot of that was that any children the couple had would not succeed to the throne. As it happens, they

didn't have children. The King has a tiny penis, I'm told. Even monkey glands didn't help. Very romantic, *hein?* Succession therefore passes through the line of Edward's younger brother, the Duke of Pork. He died in 1952, though his wife, the Dowager Duchess of Pork, is still horribly alive and busily hating Princess Consort Wallis. Succession then passed to the daughters of the Duke of Earl. Elizabeth, Duchess of Edinburgh, died in 1968, of that London fog respiratory disease. Her sister Margaret converted to Catholicism and married a lunatic, disqualifying herself. Elizabeth's oldest son Charles, until recently a naval officer nobody had heard of, has been created Duke of Cornwall, and is due to come into the crown on the death of King Edward VIII. *That's* our Prince Charming. Got it? Now, let's get *royal* out there."



The footman held open gilt-encrusted doors, and Cinzia stepped through. Grand Duchess Ekaterina Nicolaievna was sprawled across an empress-sized bed, howling like a hyena with toothache. Her governess, Mrs Orchard,

had apparently been dismissed.

Cinzia put her make-up case on the floor and coughed politely.

The Tsar's eldest daughter looked up. "Who are you?"

"I'm from ITV. I've come to make up Your Imperial Highness for the ball. I can return later if you want."

The Grand Duchess sat and stared at her. No, *through* her. At 19, she looked younger. Still losing her puppy fat, she was becoming a beauty. Perfect skin, fall of dark hair, flashing green eyes. Cinzia's grandfather would cheerfully have bashed in her skull with a rifle-butt, and no wonder.

"I'm ill," said the Grand Duchess. "I'm delicate. I might die at any minute."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Shall I fetch a doctor?"

"Yes. Tell them to fetch Dr Lysenko. Now."

Cinzia went back to the door and told the footman to summon Dr Lysenko.

She returned. The Grand Duchess was pulling off her jeans and purple silk blouse. She fell into the bed and pulled covers over her head.

The kid was no more ill than Vladi. She was feeling the withdrawal symptoms of ten minutes' lack of attention. Cinzia almost felt sorry for the Duke of Cornwall.

A hand emerged from the covers and fumbled around the bedside table. Cinzia went over. Just out of the hand's reach was a box of Swiss truffles. According to the label, they had been flown in the previous day. She pushed the box towards the fingers, which took three chocolates and disappeared. Chewing motions shook the eiderdown.

No wonder the Grand Duchess was sick.

Cinzia settled in an armchair. The Antchikov Palace was turned upside down to accommodate the British and Russian royal parties, but the Grand Duchess had been allowed to keep her apartments.

The room, a mixture of bedroom and *boudoir*, was what every Russian teenager dreamed of. Between court paintings, the walls bore posters of cartoon characters and music stars, all centred on a framed

poster of Nureyev as Agent 007 of SMERSH in *From America With Love*. In one corner was a huge stereo system with Beatles longplays scattered around it. In another, a vast dressing-table with a vaster triptych mirror. Huge windows, dotted over with see-through purple and turquoise plastic flower decals, added to the feeling of space. Beside the bed was the entrance to a wardrobe the size of the Bronstein apartment.



There was a commotion at the door. A group of people burst in. Some were obviously *pridvorny*, court people, dressed in the powdered wigs, tailcoats and knee-breeches of palace grooms. The leader was a small, chubby, elderly man in an old-fashioned pin-striped suit.

"What is the matter, Imperial Highness?" he said, bowing as he approached the bed, even though Ekaterina was hidden under the covers.

"Thank goodness you've come, Dr Lysenko," said the Grand Duchess in a feeble voice. "I'm having another attack."

Half a dozen courtiers and servants stood around looking nervous, Dr Lysenko and his assistant coaxed the Grand Duchess from under the covers and examined her at length, prodding, poking and asking her to cough. She showed no self-consciousness when the Doctor enquired about the condition of her bodily wastes.

"There's no doubt," said Dr Lysenko, partly to the Grand Duchess, partly to his audience. "You suffer from chronic Smedley's Chorea."

Admittedly Cinzia hadn't finished medical school, but she'd never heard of Smedley's Chorea.

"There! You see? All of you! I'm going to die soon! I just hope I'll make it to the wedding. I'm sure the strain of that will finish me off. Like Great Uncle Alexei!"

"Your Imperial Highness, please don't say such terrible things," said Lysenko. "With of rest and the right medication, there is no reason why you should not make a complete recovery in as little as three years."

"By which time, I will be expected to have given birth to three haemophilic sons and spent my summers being rained on in a nasty foreign country."

There was another commotion at the door. Everyone fell to their knees. Cinzia followed suit before she fully realized why.

The Tsar had entered the room, and was not pleased. Her mother would never believe this.

"You! I thought I'd had you fired. Or shot!"

Lysenko bowed.

"I had him re-hired," said the Grand Duchess. "He's the only doctor who truly understands my condition."

Tsar Nicholas III was smaller in person than he seemed on television, but then everyone was. He was still impressive. The Russian Bear personified. Big, barrel-chested, strong. His full, rounded face was mostly covered by tightly-cropped beard. He wore a rough peasant smock, a thick leather belt and baggy trousers. His fondness for chopping wood and other "peasant" activities was well-known. It was also said he could bend a rouble coin in his teeth.

"Get out, Lysenko. And the rest of you."

Nobody needed prompting. Cinzia picked up her make-up case and made for the door with the others.

"Wait! You, girl! Who are you?"

He was talking to her. She turned and bowed. "I am from ITV. I have come to apply make-up to Her Imperial Highness."

"Then stay. You will start work in a moment."

The Tsar picked up the box of chocolates.

"You will need wallpaper and paste if *Katiusha* keeps filling herself with these pollutants."

He tossed the chocolates away.

"Hah," he said. "Wallpaper. Paste."

Evidently, his remark was an imperial joke. She tried a dutiful laugh, but it came out as a cough.

Nicholas walked over to the bed and hugged his daughter. The Grand Duchess sniffed, then started crying. "You don't care about me! Nobody cares about me!"

"We all care about you. Your mother and I love you very much. So do your sisters and brother. That's why we arranged this marvellous wedding for you. All over Russia, all over the world, millions and millions of girls will go to bed tonight dreaming that they could swap places with you. Isn't that true, make-up girl?"

"Absolutely sire," said Cinzia, nodding.

Sire? Was that form of address still used?

"Then let them swap!" sobbed the Grand Duchess. "I don't want to go through with this silly wedding."

The Tsar stood upright, stuck hands into his belt and spoke evenly. "Ekaterina, I grow tired of this nonsense. You always forget that you and I are not as ordinary people. We are endowed by the Almighty with power and wealth because we have duties and obligations ordinary people don't have."

"I'll abdicate. I'll go and be an ordinary person, just like her."

She pointed at Cinzia. Something inside boiled over. This spoiled brat was wasting her time, time she could be spending at home reading a book, listening to music, playing cards with Mother. Time she could be helping people who needed help at the Free Hospital.

"Your Imperial Highness wouldn't like it very much. If you want to swap places, let's do it. I live near a particularly smelly canal. I share three rooms with my mother and a bone-idle brother. Most months we have to get by on less than 300 roubles. It's been a while since we had truffles flown in from Switzerland."

The Tsar fixed her with chilling blue eyes. For a few seconds, she was hypnotized, glimpsing an avenue of stakes, each with someone impaled on it. Had she gone too far?

The Tsar nodded, grunted agreement, almost smiled.

"Do you hear that, *Katiusha*. It is the voice of the great Russian people who love you. You must do your duty for this girl and for others like her. If you do not, I shall have to do mine, regardless."

Cinzia did not doubt he meant it. Tsar Peter had his own son tortured to death. And they called him Peter the Great.

Grand Duchess Ekaterina whimpered, "you don't love me."

"Yes I bloody well do! But I didn't father children to love them. I fathered them for the Russian Empire

and the Romanov dynasty."

Cinzia believed this, too. Before Nicholas acceded to the throne, his childless marriage to Princess Flavia of Ruritania was dissolved. His subsequent marriage to Elisabeth-Mathilde Kshesinska was a model of heir-begetting fruitfulness, but Flavia kept apartments in Moscow, Petrograd and a dacha near the palace at Tsarskoye Selo. The Tsar still visited her almost daily.

"I don't want to leave Russia," Ekaterina sobbed. "The King of England is mad. Who's to say the Duke isn't the same? Look at his ears! And I don't want to be Queen of *England*. The peasants eat dogs there and they don't have colour tele."

There was a loud, firm knock at the door.

"Yes? What now?" shouted the Tsar.

In walked a hussar officer. Cinzia was used to thinking of cavalymen driving tanks on the news reports from Indochina, but this man looked as though he was on his way to Borodino. His jacket was red, covered in gold lace; over his shoulder was slung the hussar's pelisse, a short brown overcoat lined with black fur, also plastered with braid. His fur cap boasted a white cockade and a brass plate of the imperial two-headed eagle. Straps of white leather complicated his attire even further. From some of the straps dangled what appeared to be a flattish handbag, while others were attached to the scabbard of a sabre, which he held in his white-gloved right hand.

"Well?" snapped the Tsar.

The officer saluted, slammed boot-heels together and bowed. Cinzia was secretly relieved that all of his get-up survived the agitation.

"Apologies, Sire," he said crisply, "I did not know His Imperial Highness was present. I have come to make my report to the Grand Duchess."

So "sire" still passed.

"Go on then," said the Tsar.

The officer turned to the Grand Duchess and saluted once more. "Ensign Pavel Chekhov, First Troop, First Squadron of the Akhtirska hussar regiment respectfully wishes to inform her Imperial Highness Grand Duchess Ekaterina Nicolaievna that her personal escort awaits the pleasure of her orders."

"Ensign Chekhov," said the Grand Duchess. "You in command of my escort again? I thought you had applied for a transfer to the space programme?"

"I did, Imperial Highness. It was recently decided all aristocrats were to be disqualified from becoming cosmonauts."

Cinzia remembered lunar duellists. *Krokodil*, the fortnightly satirical magazine, had carried a full report of Georgi Sanders' presentation. Count Ignatieff's younger brother thrashed Editor Solzhenitsyn through the streets of Moscow with the flat of a sabre until the self-proclaimed Funniest Man in Russia grabbed the staff of an imperial flag and defended himself. Now Solzhenitsyn was the Funniest Man Lying Low for a While in Sweden.

The Grand Duchess evidently stopped feeling sorry for herself. She held a silk sheet in front of her face. The Tsar might assume this was to protect her modesty, or be smart enough to figure Ekaterina didn't

want Chekhov to see her with red puffy eyes and mascara-stained cheeks. Cinzia recognized the symptoms: the Grand Duchess was smitten with her ensign in his tight pants. Maybe he looked less ridiculous on a horse.

"Thank you, Ensign," said the Tsar. "The Grand Duchess will come down when she is ready."

Chekhov saluted, spun round on one heel and marched out of the room. Through the door, she saw a pair of troopers bending down and cross-linking their hands to provide a seat for Chekhov. They carried him away. He'd probably had a regiment of servants smartening his uniform, shining leather, polishing brass and sewing on lace and he wasn't going to risk a speck of dirt spoiling things.

The Grand Duchess sighed, let the sheet down and addressed Cinzia. "Come on, soul of mother Russia, we'd better get started."



"Bronstein, I look like a *houri*," said Ekaterina, swivelling her head to one side and another, making eyes at the mirror.

"Under the lights you'll be radiant. You don't want to look like a ghost on tele."

The Grand Duchess now wore a pink satin ball-gown fit to grace the cover of a million women's magazines, even the snooty Viennese ones. Cinzia tried to use as little powder on that fine skin, and concentrated on eyes and lips. The Grand Duchess's hair hung loose over her shoulders, held by a small tiara set with rubies and diamonds. Without trying, she would outshine every other woman at the ball.

Maybe it was true. Maybe royals were more than human.

"I wish I could wear my hair Afrikan style," the Grand Duchess pouted. "It's too long. Perhaps I should cut it."

"You do and I'll assassinate you," said Cinzia.

They were surrounded by maids, dressers and flunkies, sewing, fussing and whispering. One or two gasped at her impertinence.

"I might as well be dead anyway," Ekaterina smiled. "I've decided I'm not going through with this marriage unless you are my personal make-up artist. I hope he likes it."

"If the Duke doesn't like you there's something wrong with him."

"The Duke... Oh. Yes. Him."

"Cinzia! Thank God I've found you," said Bondarchuk, out of breath. He bowed to the Grand Duchess. "Are you finished? We need you urgently in the Duke's suite. Half the British team are stranded at Croydon airport. An engine fell off their Bristol Brabazon. All the BBC make-up people are still there. I've got the rest of the girls working on his entourage, but I need you to do the Duke himself."

The Grand Duchess sniggered and waved her away. "I'll be fine now," she said.

Cinzia scooped her bits and pieces into the case.

It was wasted on her, really. Her mother should be here.



It took five minutes to negotiate their way across the palace, clambering over cables, lights and cameras, pushing through knots of soldiers and courtiers making last-minute adjustments to suits, dresses and uniforms.

And this was just an Imperial Ball. The wedding would be worse. It would bankrupt some of the Empire's most distinguished families. Duchesses could not wear dresses twice while there were cameras around.

In the Duke's quarters, things were even more chaotic. Luggage had gone missing, or had never come to Russia in the first place, and people rushed around trying to borrow jewellery, combs, razors, scissors, lipstick from the Russians.

Sir Anthony Blunt stood in the middle of this, looking miserable. The Duke of Edinburgh, the Duke's Father, who Paradjanov had identified as the widower of Princess Elizabeth, was trying to get Sir Anthony to arrange a wild boar hunt.

Sir Anthony broke free and hurried Bondarchuk and Cinzia into a small side-room where the Duke of Cornwall stood in his shirtsleeves looking out of the window.

"Sir Anthony," said the Duke. "We must try and do a bit of sightseeing. I love onion domes."

"Your Grace, this young lady speaks fluent English. She'll see to your make-up."

He turned to her, smiled and nodded. "Where do you want me, Miss?"

There was no dressing table. There was an armchair. It would have to do. She pointed to it. Bondarchuk made excuses and left.

The Duke sat down. She opened her case on the floor next to the chair, took out a large cotton sheet and spread it over the Duke, tucking it into the collar of his shirt.

She crouched in front of him and looked into his face. He would be more of a challenge than the Grand Duchess. Though only in his mid-20s, hardly older than her, Charles had lines. He'd been around. She was prepared to dismiss the talk of recklessly flying his helicopter into battle zones in Indochina as propaganda, but something had added ten years to his face. He was tense.

"You are nervous, sire?" she asked him.

A man cleared his throat behind her. "The correct form of address is 'your grace'." She had forgotten Sir Anthony was in the room.

The Duke shrugged and smiled apologetically.

"I rather suppose I am. It's not every day one meets one's future wife. With 400 million people watching."

He spoke with a curious, clipped accent. Not at all like the affected "upper-class twit" English accent Mother used to entertain her with.

It was a question, she decided, of smoothing out some lines and emphasising a few others. Then she noticed the ears again.

She laughed. She couldn't help it.

The Duke smiled. "What's so funny?"

Her face was on fire. She hadn't blushed like this for years. Soon she'd be too old to. "It's nothing, your grace. Nothing at all."

"I hope you'll not think it remiss of me if I tell you that you have lovely eyes. Now go on, share the joke. I can take it."

She swallowed. "Making a professional appraisal of your grace's face, it occurs to me that your grace has rather prominent ears. I was wondering if sticky tape might be of use."

The Duke froze and gave her a murderous look. Blunt muttered words in English that she didn't recognize and stormed out.

"Blunt has gone out to find someone to have you shot, young lady. Now get on with it."

She set to work, wondering if she'd still have a job in the morning. Or a head.

Moments later, a voice behind her snapped, "ACH GD 22230333 Earl of Balham reporting for duty, *sah!*"

She turned. It was the man who had laughed at Yussupov at the airport. Now he wore an Asiatic turban, a blue jacket, a tutu and ankle-boots.

The Duke grinned at him. "You can't meet my bride-to-be dressed like that, Sellers."

"Why on earth not, old fruity substance?" he said, in the upper-class twit accent her Mother imitated.

"You're not wearing your decorations. It states clearly on the invitation that medals must be worn."

Both laughed. The Earl took a hip-flask from the breast pocket of his jacket and offered it to the Duke, who refused. He took a hefty guzzle himself and then noticed her.

"Well *hellaaaoo*," he growled, crouching next to her and twiddling his moustache, "now you're a gorgeous bit of tottie, and no mistake. Are you coming to the *palais de dance*, my little Russian doll?"

She resumed work. "I am, but I shall be busy. I have to stay behind the scenes in case anyone's face falls off."

"I'd love my face to fall off for you, my little boiling samovar."

"You'd better get dressed for the ball. The British party has to leave for the Winter Palace inside the hour."

"But I'm going like this, *mein führer*. This is my formal evening dress. The turban's in honour of wartime service in Injah, RAF battledress because I was in the RAF."

"They let *you* fly an aeroplane?"

Oh dear, there she went again.

"Heavens no!" he said, switching accents. "Put me in ENSA, give 'em a song an' a dance, tell a few jokes, that was me. Every Night Something Awful. That's why I'm wearing the old tutu and boots don't you see, laddie."

Sir Anthony returned, pulling in Bondarchuk.

"I want her fired! At once. And I want all her family fired. Her insult to the Duke was unforgivable."

"Oh forget it, Tony!" said the Duke, waving him away.

The Earl of Balham went up to Blunt, puffing out his chest.

"You're talking about the woman I love, Tones. If

you fire her, you'll have to fire me, too."

Blunt turned, threw his hands up in the air and walked off.

"I have deaded him, swine rotter that he is," shrilled Balham in a high squeak, "deaded him proper."

"Thank you, Earl," Cinzia said. "To return the favour, I'll remind you that you have less than half an hour to change into clothes more appropriate to the occasion. I've met his Imperial Highness the Tsar and my estimate of his character is that he could well lock you into a dungeon and throw away the dungeon if you do anything to spoil his little girl's big day."

"You are right, my Captain. I will go and do that thing. I will. I will. I will go and put on my brown paper suit and make a dress sword from Mum's old drawers."

The Duke laughed. Balham left.

Cinzia was losing count of mad royals. She wished she had Paradjanov's handbook of who was who.

More people appeared at the door. Cinzia looked up and was surprised to see the Grand Duchess standing there.

"Is everything to your satisfaction?" she asked the Duke in heavily accented English.

"Fine thanks," he nodded politely.

"Cinzia Davidovna has done an excellent job. Would you approve if she was personally responsible for your make up and mine until the wedding's over?"

"Fine with me," said the Duke, "as long as she brings her sticky tape".

Nobody had asked Cinzia if it was fine by her. It wasn't. Not without a big pay-rise anyway.

"Do you have any idea who that insane person in the ballet skirt was?"

The Duke had no explanation.



The vast rotors of the Sikorsky gunship cut up the air with a low roar, but the ride was smooth. Whether this was an inherent property of the aircraft or whether it was

because the Duke of Cornwall was at the controls, Cinzia didn't know.

For all the noise, she heard Bondarchuk muttering into his wireless behind her. "You've got to just trust me on this. No close-ups of the happy couple when we come in to land."

At least one camera-crew would be waiting on the ground when the aircraft landed at the Imperial complex at Tsarskoye Selo.

Charles, Duke of Cornwall, and Grand Duchess Ekaterina Nicolaievna had carried on their televisioned engagement for three days. From the glittering Grand Ball at the Winter Palace through the couple's various subsequent public engagements, everything on-screen had been just fine. With three hours of live broadcast daily, ITV had captured immense ratings which still climbed. All Soyuz TV, the opposition, could offer was the remarkably unpopular comedy series *Mother Courage's Flying Circus* and repeats of *On the Trams*.

"Dear God! What I wouldn't give for a rifle right now!"



said the Duke's father. She looked out of the gunport and saw, down on the ground 200 feet below, a herd of deer running, frightened by the helicopter's noise.

Edinburgh still sulked because he was not allowed to shoot anything.

The Duke of Cornwall was following the line of a stream, and banked the helicopter slightly to the left. Cinzia fell against the Grand Duchess sitting next to her.

"I've warned you how I get air-sick! Do you want me to spew all over you?"

Yes, why not? She could scrape Her Imperial Highness's dried-up vomit into cheap lockets and sell it at a huge profit to all the poor, deluded people who hung on her antics on tele every night.

She thought of her Mother, who had for the first time in her life taken a day off from her cleaning job: to watch the Imperial Ball on tele. When Cinzia got home that night, she had had to stay up another two hours describing who she had met. She had told Mother about the Grand Duchess's tantrums, how the Duke had heartily disliked her crack about his ears, how she had seen with her own eyes how this was emphatically, definitely, utterly, absolutely not a love match. And still at the end of it all, Mother sighed about how wonderful it was to see "two young people falling in love." Mother had listened to her, enraptured that her little girl had touched this magic, but had not heard a word she was saying.

She had not realized how powerful television was. It encouraged people to believe what they wanted to. In the hands of a tyrant it could be a force for great evil. And the Tsar of all the Russias owned ITV.

There were 15 of them in the gunship, on metal bucket seats covered with fraying canvas: the Duke, Edinburgh, Sir Anthony, the Earl of Balham, the Grand Duchess, and ghastly old Grand Duchess Anastasia, who had appointed herself her great-niece's official chaperone. There were a couple of maids, a pilot, co-pilot and the ITV crew. Behind flew three other gunships, one carrying the Tsar and his entourage, the others carrying security specialists from the Okhrana and medical teams. The Tsar's Sikorsky was armed, in case it became necessary to fire on a cheering crowd of his beloved subjects.

It was no longer a question of would something go wrong. Now it was a question of when. The atmosphere in their own gunship was sour, and getting worse with every hour. Everything came back to Ekaterina.

Though nobody watching proceedings on television would have noticed anything amiss, the Grand Duchess was fast becoming unmanageable. Like a lumbering goods-train on the Trans-Siberia, she threatened to leave the rails at the next bend.

When visiting a hospital, the Grand Duchess insisted the sick people be removed and replaced by actors in case she caught anything. They had met crowds on the streets of Petrograd and the Grand Duchess had had to take a bath immediately afterwards, though she had not come closer than ten feet to any of them. On the same occasion, the police failed to contain an anti-war demonstration and placards had been waved from the back of the crowd. The Grand Duchess insisted that the city's police com-

missioner be sacked. The couple attended a charity premiere screening of *The Tempest*, the new film by the British director Michael Powell, at the *Narodny Dom*. The Grand Duchess had to be carried out with a fit of the vapours before the opening credits. The director's trademark of arrows hitting a target had given her "a terrible premonition of assassination."

"She carries on like this and I'll be the one that does it," Bondarchuk muttered when she was being carried out of the cinema. Then he crossed himself, in case the Okhrana heard.

Today was the worst. They were supposed to go on a deer hunt on the imperial estates around Tsarskoye Selo. First the Grand Duchess insisted that the helicopter's olive green and brown camouflage colour scheme be replaced with shocking pink – "exactly the same colour as that," she said, pointing to one of the lipsticks in Cinzia's case. Grand Duchess Anastasia, who only ever wore pink, agreed this would be an appropriate way of making the nasty, brutal helicopter more feminine.

The Tsar shouted that idea down. Then the Grand Duchess pouted and said shooting deer was cruel. Great Aunt Anastasia agreed. So had Edinburgh, to everyone's surprise. He then suggested the helicopter be fitted with missile-pods to ensure a quick and painless death for the deer. At this point, Balham collapsed in a fit of laughter, while the Tsar said it was impossible. The Grand Duchess flatly refused to go if any animals were going to be killed.

So they went for an afternoon spin instead. They had made an impromptu visit to a "typical" farmhouse and had an excellent discussion with a farmer about fertilizer. They had a picnic at which nobody said much to one another, and now they were going back again. The Grand Duchess was in a vile mood, which was why Bondarchuk was dissuading Paradjanov from taking close-ups.



The helicopter swooped down low over the town of Tsarskoye Selo. Beneath them was the railway station, and then the broad tree-lined boulevard with dozens of mansions to

either side. This was where the aristocracy lived in the old days; it was where some of them still lived, though many of these elegant houses had long since been divided into apartments where the bourgeois of Petrograd commuted each evening to escape the noises and stinks of the city.

At the end of the boulevard stood the gates to the Imperial Park. The 800 acres of Tsarskoye Selo proper – the "Tsar's Village" – had once been completely surrounded by iron railings, though these had been taken away to make munitions during the Great Patriotic War. Now, the boundaries were mainly wire and post, but still patrolled by cossacks and hand-picked units of the Imperial Guard, with dogs, guns, wirelasses, even remote-control cameras.

"This is great," Bondarchuk said. "We can't get

decent pictures just pointing a camera out of the window, but if you can get the ITV chopper to do this in a few minutes' time we can cut it into the evening prog with majestic music on top. Something by Prokofiev."

The Duke took the machine down lower over the Imperial Park. It was probably the first time he had seen the place. It was certainly the first time Cinzia had been here. She had seen photographs and paintings, but the Tsar – and his mother before him – had guarded its privacy fiercely.

The Park was designed to provide nothing but pleasant walks. Every inch was landscaped carefully with meticulously tended grass, or painstakingly trained woods. There were statues and monuments and flowerbeds and a huge artificial lake. The Sikorsky swooped over a *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

As a boy, Nicholas had been fascinated by paleontology. Tsarina Olga commissioned life-sized dinosaurs from S. Eisenstein, the motion picture special effects genius behind the 1932 classic *Tsar Saur*. They were equipped with clockwork mechanisms that made them jerk to life.

The grounds were completely empty. It was as though they were for the pleasure of the Tsar alone. He might wander among his flowers and Jurassic pets, undisturbed by the millions of his subjects still tied to the dirt or crowded into city slums.

The Duke banked slightly to avoid a small hill, on top of which was an exquisite red and gold Chinese pagoda. Then the palaces came into view. Cinzia gasped when she saw the Catherine Palace, an ornate blue and white confection with immensely tall windows. The simpler Alexander Palace, 500 yards from it, was dowdy by comparison.

She was getting to know palaces. The Antchikov merely reminded her of an expensive hotel, while the Winter Palace was big and cold, but this was a place of real majesty. This was where the handsome prince carried his bride, or where a canny monarch kept his or her uppity nobles from getting up to any mischief by engaging them in ludicrous ceremonial. Inside would be long, polished halls, mirrors and mahogany, silk and velvet, marble and crystal and gold.

She was still staring out of the window when she realized the helicopter blades were slowing and that everyone around was unbuckling seatbelts.

"That's it for the day," Bondarchuk told his crew. "There's nothing else tonight. Everyone's got the evening off."

An arm snaked around her waist. The Earl of Balham. "Come with me to the Casbah, Cindy."

"I'm going home for a shower and an early night."

"*Quel* shame, laddie. The Duke and I have decided to toddle into town for the evening. We were hoping you'd show us the real Petrograd. These court flunkys and pomaded pillocks don't have a clue where to go for good time. Go on, say you'll do it. Pretty please? Not for my sake, but the Duke's."

She looked at the Duke. He was taking off the headset and engaged in technical discussion with the helicopter's regular pilot.

"Just a few drinks," she said. "And no funny business."

Balham chuckled and swore loyalty.



"Compliments of Nikita's," said the waiter, placing a champagne bucket on the table.

"This is a bit of all right," said Balham around a *blini*. "Well done, Cind."

"Bottoms up," said the Duke raising his champagne flute,

"here's to our host."

They turned to the table where the proprietor sat with cronies. He raised his glass and beamed, a benevolent great uncle dispensing presents at Easter. Bringing the party here was divine inspiration. Kruschev, the most important gangster in Petrograd and a devoted monarchist, would see no harm came to his precious guests. It was lively and more-or-less respectable. Kruschev kept his less salubrious properties at arms' length.

"Chas, d'you recognize the fellows sitting on the table next to Niki's?"

"No," said the Duke to the Earl, "should we?"

Cinzia glanced. To one side was a tall, bespectacled man in early middle age with close-cropped, wiry hair. A little too careful with his appearance to be an intellectual.

"We were introduced to him at the reception for civil serviles the other morning," said Balham. "He had a meaningless job title, something with the Ministry of the Interior."

"Andropov. I remember. A senior civil servant hanging around in a shady night-club. Bit fishy, isn't it?"

"It's more than fishy, Moriarty," said Balham, slipping into a Georgi Sanders purr, "I had him down as one of the head mummies in the cloak-and-dagger brigade. Okhrana, and all that."

"*Sapristi!*" said the Duke, a word she'd never heard before.

"I'll tell you something else, old fruitgum," said the Earl. "If you turn around – *nyet yet!* – and steal a look in the next minute you'll notice Mr Andropopoff popping off. The fellah sneaking with him happens to be Harold Philby, Russia correspondent of *The Times*."

"I wonder what they were plotting?" said the Duke.

"Overthrow of civilisation as we know it. What do you think, Cindy?"

"Probably nothing important. Russians love to plot for its own sake. It's why we always knock you out of the first round in the World Chess Championships."

"We always beat you at soccer, though," said the Duke. "It's the Accrington Stanley game tomorrow. Bobby Moore at centre-forward, Gordon Banks in goal. We can't lose."

A woman in her late 20s wobbled past them. She wore a Chinese *cheongsam* so tight she could barely walk properly. Her head was shaved and a dozen ping-pong balls were magically stuck to her scalp.

"Oh I say," said Balham.

She sat alone at a table close by and took a packet of Fribourg and Treyer cigarettes and a gold lighter from a tiny handbag. Cinzia decided she must be a whore. An experienced, expert, expensive one.

Balham had barely raised his hand when the head waiter appeared at his side.

"Would you be so kind as to convey my compliments

to the lady with the lumps and ask if she would care to join us."

The waiter made the slightest gesture with his eye. The woman scooped belongings from the table and tottered over. The waiter held out the chair for her to sit down. Her jaw dropped when she realized who the Duke was.

"This is jolly, isn't it?" said Balham, "and what's your name, my dear?"

"Mariella Novotny," she said, recovering her composure. Her skin had a faint olive sheen. She might be a gypsy.

Cinzia looked at the Duke, expecting him to be discomforted by his uncle's philandering. He smiled faintly. He had seen all this before.

Balham busied himself with Mariella. Her English was basic, and he had no Russian. They communicated in broken French. Balham's accent was comically extreme, almost strangling the few words Mariella could recognize. He took her hand and ran his finger over it, pretending he could tell her fortune. Isaac would have been proud of him.

Scattered applause came as men in evening dress filed onto a small raised platform and picked up instruments. The band launched into a silky-smooth, melodious Israel Baline tune, "Always." Piano, sax and clarinet took turns at the theme. It was seductive, tinged with longing or regret. Perfect music for falling in love, or getting drunk.

Some couples took the floor to dance. Balham and Mariella joined them.

She was alone with the Duke and didn't much like it. He was still frostily polite to her for the Grand Duchess's sake, but hadn't forgiven the remark about ears.

"How do you like Mother Russia?" she asked, trying to fill an embarrassing silence.

"Very interesting. Splendid architecture. Petrograd is a beautiful city."

She wanted to tell him of the city he wouldn't see, soulless acres of low-rise concrete apartments where the plumbing never worked, but thought better of it. Another long silence.

"Look," he said at last, "I wanted to..."

"Cinz-doll!" interrupted a whiny voice, "Is it copacetic if I make like a carpenter and join you?"

Allen Martinovich. The last person she wanted to see right now, but here he was. Drunk.



He sat down, uninvited, at the table and helped himself to one of Mariella's cigarettes. "Who's your *dybbuk* friend? He looks like that English idiot the Grand Duchess is going to marry. *Babychik*, I need a favour."

"Whatever it is, the answer is no, *nein*, *non*..."

"I gotta get a gig." She looked him in the face. As usual, his eyes skittered away from hers. He hid behind oversize eyeglasses. "I need to get on my horn again, Cinz. You could talk to someone at ITV. They've got house bands. They have to need a sax-player. Put in a word, please-please?"

"If I say yes, will you go away?"

"I'll make like a train and depart, I'll make like a family photo and fade, I'll make like a tree and..."

"Enough already."

"Do you know anyone who needs a musician?" he asked the Duke. "What's your angle, anyway?"

"He's the future King of England, Allen Martinovich. He doesn't need a saxophone player."

"Don't be silly, everybody needs a saxophone player."

Hands swallowed Allen's arms as the biggest men she had ever seen lifted him from the chair and carried him from the room.

"The proprietor sends humble apologies for the unpleasant imposition," said their waiter, signalling for a minion to bring a plate of *baklava* cakes and a jug of hot honey and rosewater sauce.

"Sorry about that," she said. The Duke refilled her flute.

"Skeleton from your cupboard?"

"I went with Allen for a long time. We were betrothed. He was going to be a famous musician. Like an idiot, I believed him. I supported him while he was waiting to be famous. He nearly made it, too. He had a band, Allen Konigsberg and the Bananas. They performed at the opening of the Moscow Olympiad in '70. At the party afterwards, I caught him fooling around with a jail-bait Wallachian gymnast."

"Ouch."

"He sickens me. He ruined everything. He's the *dybbuk*."

The Duke grasped her hand across the table. "Everything will turn out fine, Cinzia," he said.

"It did," she giggled, half-hysterically. "He was pitifully infatuated with his bendy toy. He wrote a swing oratorio for her to perform to, *The Purple Rose of Cluj*. But she ran off with the novelist, Nabokov."

Her eyes stung. She drained her champagne flute at a gulp.

"What are we supposed to do with these?" said the Duke, indicating the *baklava*. He still held her hand. She poured the sauce over the cakes.

"You have to eat the cakes while the sauce is still hot."

"I wonder where our lovebirds have got to?"

"There are rooms upstairs. I wouldn't be surprised if Miss Bubblehead was an employee."

The Duke nodded. He ate a pair of *baklavas*. "These are very good."

"The country is wild for Turkish food. A new Turkish restaurant opens in Petrograd every week."

The Duke took his hand back and was oddly formal for a moment.

"I owe you an apology. Normally, I wouldn't bother. Being heir to the throne means never having to say you're sorry, but I want to say sorry to you. You didn't deserve my rudeness."

"What do you mean?"

"I got chilly when you said the thing about my ears. I don't give a damn about my appearance. If I was only Lieutenant Charles Windsor, we could laugh at my bloody ears all night long. But I have to protect the dignity of the future king. At times, I hate this job. Being a royal is a job, you know. Sometimes I think it's important. Sometimes I think it's ludicrous farce."

I see you looking at me and the Tsar and my Father and Blunt and the Grand Duchess. You think we're idiots acting out some kind of comic opera."

"I never..."

"Don't interrupt, Cinzia Davidovna. Several times in the last few days, I'd gladly have resigned. But I would let too many people down."

"Your family? The Imperial family?"

"No. The blade wouldn't fall on their necks if I was to quit. I mean the lads."

"I'm sorry. I don't follow you."

"I served in the Navy. Eighteen months in Indochina, flying Sea Kings off carriers, evacuating the wounded. For the first time in my life, something real. At Khe Sanh, I flew 62 missions in three days, didn't sleep at all. Brought in the bus 300 yards short of Karoli's forward positions. Loaded with dying men, mutilated men, men maddened by combat, men who'd never walk or see again. I can't pretend I was happy because I absolutely wasn't, but I was more *alive* than I am now. Civvies can't understand. In Britain and here in Russia, people are sick of the War. We're pulling out as messily as possible. At the moment, Indochina veterans, able-bodied and maimed alike, are merely despised, spat on by the long-hairs. Soon, the men who served will be forgotten. That's my good reason for becoming King. I'll do all I can for the men; I won't have much political power, but I can get things done. The price I must pay for that is to appear regal, to be popular. Dress in silly suits and go through this happy-ever-after charade."

He shook his head, raised his hand. A fresh bottle of champagne appeared instantly. Both their flutes were filled. Even in the low light, she could tell he was blushing.

"I shouldn't really have said all that. We're not to show our feelings, don't you know?"

"Do you love the Grand Duchess?"

He shook his head slightly. "What's love got to do with it? Duty comes first. My opinion of Ekaterina is of no importance."

She was crying. And trying not to.

"There are worse prospects. I could be stuck with blue-blooded English neurotic with a fashionable eating disorder and a brain the size of a pea."

Through blurry eyes, she saw Sir Anthony Blunt striding towards them.

"Thank heavens we've found your grace. There's a flap on out there. Half Petrograd is looking for you. Where is the Earl?"

The Duke poured himself another flute of champagne.

"Balham's in an upstairs room, Blunt. He's having a shag, so knock before you go in, there's a good fellow."



"Your Imperial Highness will be presented to the British Prime Minister, Sir Alec Douglas-Home," said Tatischeff, the court's Chief of Protocol, a spry man in purple pantaloons and red tailcoat. He wore a transparent rain hat over his pow-

dered wig. "Then Foreign Minister Enoch Powell and Minister of the Interior, Jimmy Edwards. If Your Imperial Highness might permit a humorous aside, Professor Edwards is known as 'Whacko', English onomatopoeia for the effect of one object hitting another. He sponsored a law for the birching of young criminals..."

The Grand Duchess turned to Cinzia and snorted. "These English are perverts. What good is birching? If they want to instil discipline and respect in the peasants, they should *knout* them and have done with it."

It was early evening. The Grand Duchess was supposed to be getting ready for a state dinner at the Winter Palace which would be attended by British and Russian politicians.

"You will then be presented to our Russian government. Prime Minister Henryk Kissinger and his ministers. I am sure I need not remind your Imperial Highness of their names and titles."

"You do actually," said the Grand Duchess, from inside her vast wardrobe. "No, don't bother. They're all bloody crooks anyway. I'm surprised they've bothered to come up from Moscow. How can they tear themselves away from their money and mistresses?"

"And their wire-recorders," said Cinzia. The Grand Duchess laughed.

The imperial engagement was almost upstaged by daily corruption revelations. Two nights ago, Kremlin men were caught planting electronic listening devices in the Moscow HQ of the Social Democratic Party. The Mensheviks, faking outrage, were calling for an immediate election. Vladimir said the crisis aided the cause of the Tsar more than that of the Opposition. He was convinced *Batiushka* was responsible for leaking Moscow scandals to put all politicians out of public favour. Certainly, Prince Yussopoff was celebrated for his inside knowledge of Duma dirty-doings and ITV played up the break-in as a big story. Vladi claimed a military coup in the Tsar's name was being planned at the huge army camp at Krasnoe Selo. Cinzia told her brother to stop believing the conspiracy theories he read in Bolshevik underground comics, but wasn't too sure.

"Then you come to what is called His Majesty's Loyal Opposition," Tatischeff was saying. "The leader of the Labour Party is Dennis Potter, a capable man with bad skin. His deputy, called the Shadow Foreign Secretary, is Alan Bennett. He is a very pleasant gentleman whose conversation your Imperial Highness may well find charming, though I have been warned by a foreign ministry official to beware lest he try to tell lengthy anecdotes about his elderly female relatives."

"That will be quite enough," said the Grand Duchess emerging from the wardrobe. Cinzia guessed she had taken in none of the briefing. The man bowed, back creaking, and left.

"I don't have a thing to wear," said the Grand Duchess, leaping onto her bed. "The court dressmaker must provide a miracle."

The Grand Duchess had heard of Cinzia's adventures with her fiancé and the Earl of Balham, and was evidently amused. She wanted to know about Nikita's, and about the Earl absenting himself with a

woman of easy repute. She thought the escapade hilarious. Cinzia did talk about the Duke's confession that he hated his job.

"Put the tele on," said the Grand Duchess. "It's time for *The Rostovs*."

Cinzia got up and walked to the set at the end of the bed and switched it on. The Afrikan beat 1812 Overture was already playing over a series of post-card views of domes.

There was a tap at the door, and a small procession of women entered. A stout matron bearing a green silk dress. The Grand Duchess leapt off her bed and greeted the dress. She took it and held it against her body. She turned to a mirror.

"This is horrible. The colour makes me look as though I have an unpleasant disease!"

There was an embarrassed pause. Cinzia thought the dress beautiful. It had a simple, understated elegance. The colour perfectly matched the Grand Duchess's eyes.

"The *decolletage* is immense. Obviously, none of you have been to the Winter Palace in a low-cut gown. Ladies, they don't call it the Winter Fucking Palace because it's hot! If I wore this I'd get a chill and probably die! Then you'd feel pretty terrible. Remember the Egyptian Royals who had their servants buried with them. No, not you Cinzia; you'd have to stay alive to make me look nice in the sarcophagus... Out! All of you!"

The Grand Duchess steamed in exasperation as the panicked women scurried out. She flopped back down on her bed to watch *The Rostovs*. Cinzia sat next to her.

"That's it!" said the Grand Duchess suddenly. "The dress I want!"

Onscreen, Natasha burst into Prince Bolkonsky's office to abuse him for bankrupting her Uncle Vanya. She wore a loose cotton *djellaba*, printed with bright colour swirls.

The Grand Duchess pushed a buzzer at her bedside. Mrs Orchard emerged through a hidden side-door.

She pointed to the screen. "I want that dress, Mrs O. Get it for me. *Now*."

The woman's eyes bulged. "That's *The Rostovs*, isn't it? It's broadcast live."

"So?"

"We can't get you the dress immediately. We'll have to wait an hour."

"We don't have time, Mrs O. In an hour, I have to be at a banquet for the civilized world's most important criminals and perverts and I want to wear that dress. Get it for me!"

Mrs Orchard, clearly regretting that she had not punished her charge more when she was little, left the room.

On tele, Talia Gurdin and Yul Brynner worked the sexual chemistry that made Natasha and Prince Bolkonsky a hit with the viewers. They circled each other, shouting and lashing out, occasionally making soothing noises and embracing.

"My marriage is going to be like that," said the Grand Duchess. "Only without the interesting bits."

The next scene was laid in a lavish drawing room

where Pyotr Bezukhov (Romek Polanski), son of Prince Bolkonsky's best friend, told his great grandmother (Maria Ouspenskaya) how much he was in love with a gypsy singer, Yelena (Nana Mouskori). Pyotr burst into tears (he was a poet) and said his sacred duty was to follow the dictates of his heart, even if he died.

The Grand Duchess sighed "if only."

Back in the Prince's office, Natasha was still screaming. She paced towards the door. The zip at the back of her dress was undone. She wasn't wearing a brassiere.

The camera cut to the Prince, furiously justifying his decision to send his mad brother Nikki (Stefan Berkoff) to Siberia.

The camera cut back to a close-up of Gurdin, looking downwards, displaying unfeigned anger and anxiety. The camera pulled back: a man in a brown overalls held a towel in front of the actress's chest and midriff, while a woman in a white coat busied herself around her hips.

There was a brief snowstorm and the picture returned to Brynner, eyebrows an inch upwards from their usual position. He stuttered his lines.

Cinzia collapsed into fits of painful laughter. "It must be fun to be a Grand Duchess."

"No fun at all. It might be fun to be a Grand Duke, or a Tsarevich like my big brother. Men in the Imperial family are allowed to fall in love. They must marry out of duty, but can keep mistresses. It's different for women."

The Grand Duchess got off her bed. "I've been reading this book by an Australian commoner. *The Female Eunuch*."

Cinzia had heard of it.

There was a timid tap. Mrs Orchard came in, triumphantly bearing Natasha Bolkonskaya's colourful *djellaba*.

"It was rushed over here in a police car."

"Bring it back tomorrow. Tonight I'm going to strike a blow for women."

The Grand Duchess disappeared into her wardrobe and emerged holding a scarlet trouser-suit.

"Time to put my face on, Cindy. As little makeup as possible. Enough to stop me looking like a corpse, but not so much that it seems I've tarted up just to please some man."

Another knock at the door.

"Enter," said the Grand Duchess.

An officer strode in, saluted. It took Cinzia a moment to recognize Chekhov without his hussar get-up. He was in the more usual dress uniform: green tunic, green trousers, peaked cap worn at an angle. He still had more than enough gold braid.

"Her Imperial Highness's escort awaits orders."

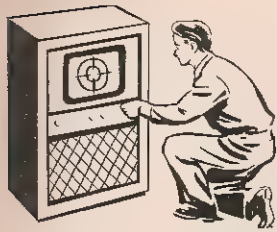
"Pavel, I'm trying to decide what to wear. A ball gown or this suit. What do you think?"

Chekhov's eyes widened. He smiled like a schoolkid awarded a pound of sweets and a day off school.

"You'd look smashing in a potato sack, Ek."

Smashing? Ek?

The Grand Duchess walked up to Chekhov, scarlet suit held to her body. "Make my decision for me, Ensign."



"We were provoked," said the President of the Dynamo Petrograd Claque, talking straight to the camera. In the background, ambulance-crews busied themselves with casualties. Police-car lights flashed. Officers

shouted at one another, talked urgently into radios.

The Grand Duchess had dismissed Cinzia. Bon-darchuk didn't need her for the evening, so she could get an early night.

After her weekly shower, she sat in her bathrobe, watching Yussopoff smirk through the main evening news. The lead story was that Leonid Brezhnev, the Social Democrat leader, was accused of taking a heavy percentage of the bribes paid to Menshevik local authorities for building contracts.

"We were absolutely provoked," said the President, who was being interviewed. "When their team won, the *Angliskis* sang anti-Russian songs. We had to protect the honour of the Motherland. Any group of honest patriots would do what we did. Steamed in and give a well-deserved spanking. End of story."

The man had a scar running from below his ear to the side of his mouth. The friendly between Dynamo and Accrington Stanley had ended in a riot.

"I see you're carrying a sabre," said the interviewer. "Is that strictly necessary?"

"A lot of the Claque carry sabres. With this fashion for big baggy trousers it's easy to slip one inside 'em and get into the stadium. You've got to look after yourself. Football, right, well it's a game of two halves, isn't it? First, there's the bit where the players play the match. Then there's the fighting, where the fans prove loyalty to their team and protect its honour."

The telephone rang. The only people who ever called were her bosses, needing her in a crisis. It was Zhivago, Director of the Free Hospital.

"I know how busy you are at the moment, I wouldn't bother you if it wasn't an emergency."

On tele, the news showed the Dynamo Claque were armed with sabres, coshes, razors and, in a couple of cases, revolvers. The English fans were cheerful sporting spirits in scarves and bobble hats, carrying nothing more lethal than wooden rattles.

"I haven't seen this since the War. We've hundreds of *Angliskis* in here. I need every medic I can get."

The news cut to the Free Hospital. A middle-aged man with a toothbrush moustache sat upright in bed, heavily bandaged. He still wore an English flat cap.

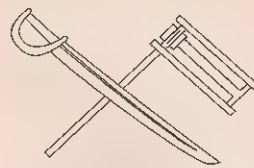
"I never thought I'd see the day when footer fans would go at one another with blimmin' swords."

"You're one of the few English-speaking nurses we've got. Some of these men are bleeding to death. I need donors, too."

She hung up and turned to her brother. "Get your coat on, Vladi. You're going to be a blood donor."

"Will it hurt?" asked Vladimir.

"It'll hurt a lot more if you don't come," she said.



Her watch said ten to midnight but it felt later. She had administered countless injections and pills, put a few limbs in plaster and stitched a dozen wounds.

In a side office off the Casualty Ward, Cinzia gratefully accepted a mug of coffee. A nurse passed around a half-pint bottle of vodka. Everyone added a dash to their drink.

All sat on chairs or the floor. Some kicked off their shoes, lit cigarettes. Most of the patients were comfortable now; sent back to their cheap hotels or put to bed here.

"Where's that dishy brother of yours?" asked Lara, one of the younger nurses.

"I only brought him to drain his juice. He's still here?"

"He's been helping, lifting patients. It's wonderful to have a strong pair of arms around."

"You didn't let him near drugs?"

Vladimir wouldn't hang around the hospital without a good reason. Maybe he fancied Lara.

"Ladies!" said Colonel Yevgeny Ivanov, appearing at the door. "My butchers and I will take our leave in a moment."

With the Free Hospital overwhelmed with casualties, Ivanov – Chief of Medical Services, Petrograd Military District – had come from Krasnoe with two helicopters loaded with hundreds of units of conscripted blood and a team of army surgeons. The military sawbones were the sweepings of the medical schools, but they had experience cleaning and closing wounds in Indochina.

The Colonel was handed a mug of Turkish coffee and the vodka. He poured himself a generous shot and raised the mug.

"I toast you, ladies. I would be a proud man indeed if any one of you served at one of my field-hospitals."

Vladimir appeared. Somewhere he had found a white coat and stethoscope. He saw the Colonel and made to leave again. A sheaf of papers fell from under his coat.

Ivanov put down his mug and bent to help Vladimir with the documents.

"I saw you work earlier. You are a medical orderly, yes?"

"I volunteered, just for tonight," said Vladimir, face reddening.

"It is gratifying to see a youth with a sense of social responsibility. This must be important paperwork for Dr Zhivago?"

"Very urgent. If you will excuse me..."

"Before you go, what is your name?"

"Bronstein. Vladimir Davidovich Bronstein."

"I couldn't help but notice that you have there a batch of Exemption from Military Service Blanks. It's disgraceful but there is a black market in Exemption Certificates. Here in Russia, there are unpatriotic, antisocial elements who steal these papers from hospitals and sell them to cowards who would shirk their duty to their country. Shocking."

Vladimir sighed and shook his head unconvincingly.

"I expect you've done your military service Vladimir. Or are you still a student?"

"I'm sorry to say I was exempted, Colonel. Weak chest."

"Really? A strapping lad like you? I saw you helping this pretty nurse lift men off stretchers earlier on. I'd say the doctor who denied you the chance to perform your sacred duty to the Motherland was a quack. You're a born medical orderly. We need men like you in the 'Chine."

Vladimir looked pleading. She shrugged. He deserved what was coming to him. She hoped, for Mother's sake, he wouldn't be sent to the front line.

Ivanov punched Vladimir playfully in the stomach. "I'm going to help you, Vladimir Davidovich. You must have been devastated to miss the chance to serve your country. I see there's nothing wrong with you. I'm giving you a second opinion. A few months' training will sort out your chest problems: assault courses, route marches, cross-country runs, small-arms training, lots of parade-ground drill. Make a man of you. Then we'll fly you first class to Indochina. Sadly, as a medico you probably won't be assigned to an operational zone. If you would prefer a combat unit, I can arrange it..."

"No, no," said Vladimir quickly. "I've always been interested in, um, bandaging people and such."

"Splendid. I'll have the papers sent. Don't worry, we'll have your address on file."

The Colonel retrieved his coffee, drained it in one go and marched out. He turned at the door. "I bid you ravishing ladies fond adieu. It is a privilege to work beside such dedicated professionals. Should any of you wish to volunteer for the Army Medical Service - pay's lousy, but company's great, you'll all find soldier husbands within the week - phone Krasnoe camp and ask for Colonel Yevgeny Ivanov."

He grasped Vladimir's head in both hands and kissed him on either cheek, then left.

"*Bozhe moi!*" said Vladimir.

The noise of rattling bottles came from the corridor. She looked out. Three men in suits carried crates of large brown bottles. A fourth, the Earl of Balham, carried cartons of cigarettes. The Duke of Cornwall was with him, too, hands clasped behind his back.

"Cinds!" said Balham. "Delightful to see you here! Small world, isn't it? Chas and I thought we should come over after the bunfest and bring home comforts to the troops."

Despite the hour, the lights in the ward were on. Most patients weren't yet asleep. They sat up in bed, playing cards or discussing the evening's adventures.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" said Balham, striding into the ward. "Merry Christmas everybody!"

When they recognized their visitors, the men raised a cheer. The Earl and the Duke went up and down the ward handing out cigarettes and India Pale Ale. "Flown in from Blighty at enormous expense."

Both men stopped to chat with the patients as tops were cracked off the bottles on the edges of bedside tables. Cinzia noticed they were more interested in getting Balham's autograph on their plaster casts and cigarette packets than the Duke's. Cornwall gravitated towards the men who had fought in Indochina

and would chat quietly with each for a while.

Balham disappeared behind a screen and emerged completely naked. He waited a moment for everyone to notice him.

"I say, you fellows, can anyone tell me where I can find a decent tailor round here?"

The men laughed as Balham, still naked, climbed on top of a table and went into a long and utterly meaningless speech. As she realized Balham was pretending to be a politician, the Duke appeared at her side.

"You're a long way from the fairy tale tonight."

"I work here, as a volunteer. I didn't want to let my medical training go completely to waste."

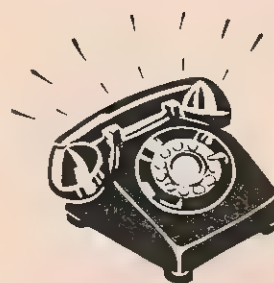
"You prefer this to being a make-up girl?"

"The tele pays better than nursing, and we need every penny we can get. But this is more useful. And rewarding."

"Thank you for helping the lads," said the Duke, pointing to the men, now enjoying beer, tobacco and Balham's clowning.

She shrugged. "It was good of you to come and see them."

"I thought we'd never escape that bloody banquet and all those politicians."



She was home by 1.30. The telephone rang. She rushed to answer it before it woke Mother.

"Hello."

"Cinzia?"

"Yes."

"It's Charles here. Duke of Cornwall, that is."

"Hello."

"I just wanted to... thank you again. For all you did for the lads. Much appreciated."

"It was nothing."

"I'll say goodnight, then."

"Okay, goodnight."

As she set down the receiver, mother came into the living room.

"Who was that at this time of night?"

"Just the Duke of Cornwall. Goodnight, Mum."



The elegant drawing room, furnished approximately in the rococo style, was knee-deep in cables and drowning in light. An elderly lady dressed in pink sat on a sofa, a massive pink handbag in her lap, smiling at technicians buzzing around her.

"Two minutes, everyone," said Paradjanov. "That's two minutes,

Imperial Highness."

Day eight of the Royal and Imperial engagement, Sunday, was to be a strictly televised affair. All four crews had moved to yet another Imperial palace, the Gatchina, 20 miles south of Petrograd, for a three-hour special about both families.

Several members of the Duke's family who had not been here before had been flown in and would stay

until the wedding took place. Cinzia had been presented to the Duke's grandmother, the Dowager Duchess of York, who seemed very charming but struck her as a formidable character. She'd also met Balham's wife, the Duke's aunt, whom she overheard some of the others in the British party refer to as "Lady Bluebottle" or even "Lady Gin-Bottle". King Edward and Princess Consort Wallis had not yet come. They would only arrive for the wedding itself. The Tsar, likewise, was considered above this kind of thing.

"Everyone clear the floor," said Paradjanov.

Prince Yussupov emerged, sporting a black kaftan with violent *eau-de-nil* splotches. He bowed to the pink lady and sat on the sofa next to her.

The Grand Duchess Anastasia Nicolaievna was the Tsar's aunt. Even if she had not been born into the Imperial family, Anastasia would have been rich. For as long as anyone could remember, she had written romantic novels with historical settings. Cinzia had been briefly addicted when she was 13, but quickly tired of them. The amazingly prolific Grand Duchess was still a regular fixture in the bestseller lists. Well into her 70s, she knew the royal families of Europe intimately (she was related to all of them). Since her stories were regularly televised, she was completely at home among TV people. Paradjanov, director of *Catherine, the Woman and Ivan, You're Not So Terrible*, was one of the few she trusted to do justice to her sumptuous tales of love among the aristocracy.

Cinzia and other crew members withdrew to the adjoining ballroom where British and Russian dignitaries were being dressed or made up. They took coffee and watched the monitors, awaiting their cues to go in and chat with the Prince and the Grand Duchess.

"It looks hot under those lights," said Cornwall. He was behind her, so close she could feel his breath on her neck.

"Whatever you do, try not to look uncomfortable. People notice."

He pulled back from her slightly, and smiled. "Do you think I should try and hold Kate's hand?"

"Kate? The Grand Duchess Ekaterina? I don't know. You could ask her."

"I don't know where she is. To be honest, I'm terrified she might slap me in the face for my forwardness if I try to take her hand on tele."

"She won't. The only person in the world she's afraid of is Grand Duchess Anastasia Romanova."

"She frightens the life out of me, too."

Yussupov was on fawning form, explaining to the camera that Anastasia was the last surviving daughter of Nicholas the Good, the Tsar who dedicated his life to the peaceful transformation of Russia from absolutism to democracy. The Grand Duchess replied in French, which she spoke fluently. She also spoke perfect English and German, and refused to speak Russian. Vladi said she was 'a reactionary old bat' who refused to speak the language of the ordinary people the Romanovs no longer ruled.

"My father was a generous man who worked tirelessly for the good of Russia," said Anastasia. "Some say he was far-sighted in conceding a Duma and a

democratic constitution, but my view is that he was blackmailed into it by scoundrels and demagogues when we were weakened during the First Patriotic War. You look at politicians nowadays, all the corruption and spying on one another. They're a shabby lot. I know people say I'm old-fashioned, but I know with all my heart that the old system was better. An autocratic Tsar takes no backhanders. He does not try to curry favour because there's an election around the corner. He does not get surprised in a hotel room with a can-can dancer..."

"I say!" said Balham loudly. "What's the bally point in being Tsar then?"

Cinzia looked towards him. Lady Balham elegantly drew a cigarette-holder to her lips. Maybe smoke caused her eyelids to droop so much. Or perhaps it was contempt.

Behind Lady Balham stood her mother, Dowager Duchess of York. And she was looking straight at Cinzia with what seemed intense curiosity. Her head was inclined slightly: a result of some ailment of old age, or maybe force of habit. Tilting your head a little made for better photographs.

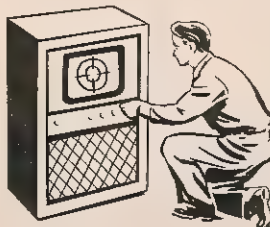
Cinzia looked away to see the Duke looking at her.

"What is it? Have I got a piece of cabbage stuck on my teeth?"

"There's nothing wrong with you at all," said the Duke, turning back to the monitor.

With the help of brief clips, Yussupov ran through the recent history of the Romanov dynasty for the benefit of schoolchildren and foreign viewers: the funeral of Tsarevich Alexis in 1925; the constitutional change that allowed women to succeed to the throne; the marriage of Tatiana, Nicholas' second-eldest daughter, to Prince Louis of Bourbon-Parma; the cannonade announcing the birth of their only child Nicholas, the present Tsar ...

There was nothing in the film about the marriage of Grand Duchess Olga, Nicholas' eldest daughter, to Crown Prince Carol of Rumania. Small wonder. Olga had not wanted to leave Russia. When she learned of her husband's womanising, she shot him and retired to a convent.



More film: the death of Prince Louis while attempting the world land speed record at Brooklands in 1931; the death of Tsar Nicholas in 1940; Tsarina Tatiana in nurse's uniform, Tatiana at the wheel of a truck taking

food across the frozen Lake Ladoga, Tatiana standing on a tank near the front showing kneeling troops an icon, Tatiana lighting the great bonfire of captured German standards at the victory parade in 1945...

Mother would be watching this with tears in her eyes. The backdrop to the best years of her life was etched in the career of the indomitable empress. Even in old age the tall, willowy Tatiana, with her dark hair and grey eyes, had a cold, enchanting beauty. Born to command, she was the saviour of Petrograd,

if not her country, in the Great Patriotic War. While politicians cowered in Moscow bunkers or fled beyond the Urals, a woman with less formal power than the Duma's Doorkeeper stayed through the German siege of Petrograd, vowing to die with the defenders. When Tatiana died in 1970, Cinzia's mother (an English-woman) cried for two days.

Onscreen, Grand Duchess Anastasia reminisced about Tatiana's funeral. A million people had surrounded the Cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan. Cinzia was there, with Mother, surprised to see so many young people with long hair among middle-aged and elderly war veterans. One hair-head held up a sign saying GOD BLESS EMPRESS TATIANA, HEROINE OF A RIGHTEOUS WAR. The point about the current unrighteous one was lost on nobody.

"I'm on in 40 minutes," said the Duke. "Could you touch me up?"

She led him to a corner of the vast ballroom that was curtained-off like a hospital bed. It was a make-shift dressing room. She sat him in front of the mirror and tucked a sheet into his collar.

"You're tense," she said. "Still nervous about holding your fiancée's hand on tele?"

The Duke's hand slipped out from under the sheet and patted her on the hip. It was not unprecedented: Georgi Sanders, among others, often took the opportunity of having her bend over him to paint his face to snatch a feel of her bottom. The Duke's touch was more tentative, affectionate rather than lecherous. His hand stayed on her hip. No, she admitted, his touch was shading into lechery.

"Was there something, your highness?" she said, tapping his hand. He took it back as if scalded.

"Charles," he said.

"Charles."

He looked oddly sheepish, like a little boy caught out. On impulse, she kissed his forehead. Looking at his face in the mirror, he was bright red under his powder. His hand emerged again and took hers, gently. His throat worked, as if he were swallowing: his adam's apple was as prominent as his ears.

The curtain twitched aside and a man popped his head in, breaking the moment.

Charles went redder and started sweating. He looked guiltier than Kissinger.

"I'm frightfully sorry," said the person from Porlock. "I was looking for someone. George Smiley. Security wallah. Have you seen him?"

They both shrugged. The intruder showed no sign of departing.

She remembered the man. He had been at Nikita's: Balham had recognized him as Philby, a senior English journalist. He was a very well-connected newspaperman if he could breeze unsupervised about the Gatchina.

"You're British, aren't you?" Charles said. Philby nodded. "Good. You'd be obliged to obey an order from your future king."

"Certainly, highness."

"Well, push off then, there's a loyal subject, would you."

Philby looked at them both. She had an impression of canny intellect.

"I'd be delighted, highness."

Philby withdrew and Charles got out of the chair, the sheet falling from his collar. She had to look up to him. The red had faded from his face. He still held her hand.

"Cinzia..."

Oh hell, she thought, letting him kiss her.

The polite, formal, etiquette school kiss escalated gently. He didn't taste more royal than other men, though his tongue was sweeter than the Allen's nicotine-permeated one.

She closed her eyes and felt his pull. He held her hands in the small of her back, pinning her to him. Medals pressed against her blouse.

Somewhere, "Always" was playing.

A tiny soothsayer of panic sparked in her mind. Whatever Isaac might prophesy, make-up girls did not win Princes. At least, not for long.

She broke the kiss and pulled back, letting go his hands.

"Cinzia..."

"No," she said, kindly. "I don't want to hear it. I think you're better than that. And I am too."

She couldn't read his face. Royalty were trained to obscure their feelings. But she had *felt*: appreciated the tentative, trembling touch. She knew enough simple leches to recognize deeper feeling.

This was not fair. This was impossible.

Damn it, she kissed him. He was surprised, but responded. She knew she would stop kissing him soon. When she wanted to.

There was a warning commotion outside the curtained area. She stood away from Charles. The Grand Duchess had arrived.

"You're on," she told him. He sighed and adjusted his uniform.



"You could tell they were in love," Mother told her. She had faithfully watched Yussopoff's interview with

Anastasia and the Royal Couple. "It may have been a political thing at first, but it's a matter of the heart now. I know you're still a cynic, dear, but he was just *glowing*. And she's so *lovely*."

The Grand Duchess Ekaterina had been attended by her hussar, Chekhov. He was the only subject in all the Russias who would think of calling her "Ek."

Cinzia could have told Mother more about Charles's glow, but hadn't sorted it out in her mind yet. She knew from the sick feeling in her tum that she was stuck; it hadn't been this bad since the first week with Allen. She also knew from alarums ringing in her brain that she'd never been involved with a man who could get her into more trouble. Including Allen.

If this came out and it were down to Anastasia, Cinzia would be lucky to get off with an *oubliette*. For ruining the fairy tale, she would most likely be beheaded with a scimitar.

"They held hands but never looked each other in the eye," Mother said, meaning Charles and Ekaterina. "That means something."

She should resign from ITV, work full-time as a nurse, marry a doctor, bear a half-dozen sons for Russia, get out before it got worse.

"He's changed, the Duke of Cornwall," Mother said. "He looked so gawky when he first came to Russia, so ill-at-ease. Now, he's become handsome. That's love for you."

Cinzia wanted to strangle her mother with her Imperial Wedding Souvenir towel.



She had recognized the voice on the telephone, speaking English with a comical Russian accent,

as one of Balham's characters. With conspiratorial glee, he told her to be on the steps of Our Lady of Kazan the next morning at nine, wearing an orchid in her hair. She did not bother with the flower, but had turned up at the cathedral.

Hordes of the devout swarmed around. On the steps was a permanent vigil of Russian mothers who'd lost boys in Indochina. They handed out snowdrops for peace. Cinzia took one and fiddled with it, waiting. A longhair strummed a balalaika, wailing a song about the War, "Sonia, Don't Take Your Love to Kiev". He wore fingerless gloves and had a transparent scraggle of beard like Che Guevara's.

Vladimir had cleared out of the flat, taking his guitar and records. He would lie low or flee to Finland until Ivanov forgot about rescinding his certificate of exemption. Or the war ended.

A pilgrim tottered towards her, weighed down by a bearskin coat and a huge fur hat. Despite the false moustaches, she recognized Charles.

He kissed her before she could giggle too much.

After a while, she pushed him away to look at his disguise. She professionally adjusted his sticky moustache.

"I hope you used the proper gum or your upper lip will be skinned."

"One had help."

"Let me guess, the Earl..."

"...never travels without his old stage make-up kit."

"Charles," she said, seriously.

"No. Today one is just Old Karol, Humble Sight-Seer. And you are my Tour Guide."

She looked around. There were two obvious Okhrana men huddled by a chestnut stove, eyes on the peace protesters.

"Do you know the penalty for two-timing a daughter of the Tsar?" she asked.

"Chemical castration, one believes. And forfeiture of estates and titles."

"You can laugh. The blood of Catherine the Great flows in that little twit's veins. Our heads could be book-ends."

A mounted guardsman trotted by, plumes bobbing. Longhaired kids chanted at the toy soldier. "*Nothing could be finer than to be in Indochina killing chi-ildren...*"

Charles was surprised.



"That's not fair," he said. "Our lads are brave souls."

"And that guardsman's for show, not for the 'Chine."

"They don't know what they're saying."

The guardsman was gone, but the kids still jeered, sloganizing while the balalaika man strummed. They sang "Hey hey, Corporal Kray, how many kids did you kill today?"

Kray, an English NCO, was standing trial at the Old Bailey, having allegedly ordered the massacre of an Indochinese village. Around the ITV news room, Cinzia heard stories of worse atrocities committed by Russians.

Charles was reddening, not with embarrassment. She had to intervene before he laid into the kids.

"Remember your disguise, Old Karol," she said, holding his shoulder, nuzzling his false moustache.

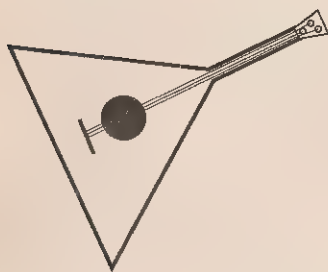
"I'm sorry, Cinzia. But they don't know what it's like."

She slipped an arm around his waist and steered him away from the Cathedral.

"Kings in disguise always hear things they don't want to," she said. "That's the whole point of the exercise."

His arm was light on her shoulder.

"Not this time."



"So this is where you live. It's very..."

"Small?"

Mother was still at work. She had brought the Duke of Cornwall back to the apartment.

Charles stood in their front room,

uneasy in a domicile with fewer than a hundred rooms.

"Cosy," he said, at last, deciding.

She laughed.

"Well, all right, small."

"Dingy, too. Cold in winter, hot in summer. Cramped. Hard to fit three difficult people into?"

"Which is your room?"

"Usually, I sleep on the couch. But with Vladi underground, I can stretch out on his floor-cushions. It won't last."

They had spent the day walking around Petrograd, pretending to be ordinary. Well, Charles pretended. Cinzia was the genuine article, though she didn't feel ordinary just now. Not every girl walks out with the future husband of a daughter of the Tsar.

In Alix's, her favourite cheap restaurant ("You can get your kixes at Alix's"), a waiter thought he recognized Charles. She said "Karol made a record once, but it didn't sell." Charles flashed the peace sign and solemnly said "man" like a longhair. She laughed for minutes.

Without meaning to, she opened Vladi's door. A herbal scent still clung to everything inside. Charles led her into the room.

"Who's that?" he indicated Che. "A relative?"

"You don't get out at all, do you?"

He looked sad and silly in his absurd moustache. She sat down cross-legged on the crimson and yellow cushions. Awkwardly, Charles folded his legs and joined her.

Most of the books on the shelves were by French or American communists. French reds had more style, Cinzia understood, which was why kids followed Chairman Godard's Paris line rather than the stolid grimness of First Secretary Goldwater's USSA.

They were holding hands.

How does one set about seducing Royalty? She had imagined from Anastasia's novels that it would be easier. The room should be a lot bigger, more luxuriously appointed, and have a four-poster bed in it. She should be in a ball-gown with three yards of silver train.

Charles was in his embarrassed phase again. Like Balham, he was only confident when pretending to be someone else: Old Karol, or the fairy tale prince engaged to Ekaterina. As himself, he was terminally uncertain.

She wondered if Vladi had left any *bhang* behind.

His eyes were fixed on her chest. A lot of men were like that. But this was just a way of not meeting her eyes.

She tilted his chin upwards and looked at him. He was not that much older than her. She peeled his moustache off in one easy pull and stuck it to her own upper lip, twitching it in an exaggerated manner. She looked like The Little Anarchist, the character her grandfather played in his silent films.

"Kiss me and tell me if it tickles."



Emerging from the lobby of the apartment house as evening fell and lamps flickered unreliably, Cinzia was sure every passerby and loiterer was watching them.

For her, this was a first. Having made love with a Prince, an interesting enough

addition to her repertoire of experience, she was certain the whole world knew about it. It was ridiculous to assume that a big furry hat and a fake 'tache could enable Charles to avoid his Okhrana shepherds and whichever agencies, foreign and domestic, who might take an interest in his affairs. In his affair, in this case.

She kissed Charles goodbye as he slipped back for his evening's televised fireworks display. He walked off jauntily, like any other man who has spent an afternoon with his girlfriend.

She looked up and down the street. The man with a dog might have been stirred by Charles's appearance and be following him in the pretence of exercising the animal. And the big German car prowling towards the canal seemed slower than it should be.

Charles turned and blew her a kiss. He looked about twelve. His ears kept his oversize hat from falling over his whole head.

She told herself not to be paranoid. Not everybody was a spy.

Charles hurried off, whistling.

A man in an expensive coat, who had stood shadowed in a doorway opposite, stepped forward and clicked a camera, startling her. She realized she was wearing Charles's false moustache.

She recognized the attache from the Happy Guys Club. Not everyone might be a spy, but Isaac had told

her that Harlan was. The American smiled with genuine friendliness and took a picture of Charles turning the corner.

Cinzia looked to the sky, a grey wedge above the black building-tops. Now, she was of interest to Great Powers.

She worried about what Mother would think.



In the upstairs bar of the Happy Guys Club, Isaac Asimov and Georgi Sanders played *faro*. A half-empty litre of vodka sat between them.

Cinzia was unsurprised to see Allen's Wallachian mop-pet, still not old enough for liquor, at the bar. She'd dumped her novelist for *Ros-*

tovs star Romek Polanski, who was cajoling her into sampling an ice cream topped with three inches of assorted fruit.

"Weren't you going to shoot yourself?" she asked Georgi.

He didn't look up from his cards.

"Thought I'd wait, my dear," he purred. "This damn Imperial Wedding is getting all the air-time. My suicide would be relegated to a humorous item before the weather forecast. I await a slow news season."

"Isaac, things are complicated," she explained. "Can we talk?"

"Of course, child."

"Don't mind me," said Sanders. "I have no one to tell your secrets."

She sat down and poured herself a shot of Stoli. She took it in a swallow. Hot tears pricked her eyes as her throat burned.

"That's supposed to clear the head," Isaac said.

She took another.

"And that's supposed to fog it up again," said Sanders.

She looked around. Polanski cuddled up to the gymnast, who shrank away, playing with a cherry plucked from her sundae.

"Cinzia," Isaac said. "I scry something is the matter?"

She laughed. "What are you, a fortune teller?"

She was leaking hot tears, but not crying.

"You said I'd marry a Prince, Isaac Judaiovich. You were nearly right. I seem to have slept with one."

"Not Yussopoff!"

She felt sick. "No. It's not *that* bad. It's Charles, the Duke of Cornwall. The fiancé of Grand Duchess Ekaterina."

"Big Ears," said Sanders, still pondering his hand.

"They aren't that big," she snapped. "It's the way he wears his hair. He can look quite nice with some work."

"Cinzia Davidovna, you're in love!"

"No. Yes. Maybe. I don't know. You're supposed to see all, you old fraud."

"There are mysteries impenetrable even to my powers."

"Stow it, Isaac. I need help, not mumbo-jumbo. I'm being followed. Your friend the American cultural attaché, Harlan. And someone I'm sure is Okhrana."

Isaac was still shocked. Obviously, he had not foreseen this.

"They can make me disappear, can't they?"

"They made *me* disappear," Sanders said.

"I don't see it's any of their business, whoever they might be," Isaac said.

"But with the wedding..."

"That's it. Harming you would raise questions. Your little affair would come out. That would spoil the story. Nobody wants that. Not the Tsar, not the Brits, not ITV..."

"Soyuz TV would broadcast your confession," Sanders said. "They've offered me an aristocratic game show, *What's My Lineage?* You could go public, piddle on the parade. Scupper Yussopoff's ratings."

"I don't want trouble. I don't want to spoil the wedding."

"Is that why you're sleeping with the groom?"

"Have slept."

"There's a difference?"

"This thing with the Duke," Isaac said. "It was a one-time occurrence?"

"So far."

"I thought better of you."

"So did I."

"You haven't slept with either of *us*," Sanders grumbled. "And it's not as if you haven't had the opportunity."

She looked at the pair of them and was tempted to laugh. The gymnast slapped Polanski, who burst into tears as he did every week on *The Rostovs*.

"Are you going to see him again?" Isaac asked

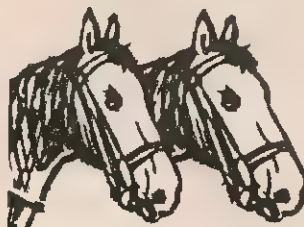
"I have to. I'm doing make-up for the wedding."

"Not like that."

"I don't know."

"Look into your heart and scry the truth, Cinzia."

"Don't be silly, Isaac."



"It's so beautiful, loves," sobbed Paradjanov as he fluttered a length of see-through orange silk over the camera, one eye on the couple on horseback, the other on the monitor. "So poetic."

Cinzia wanted to be sick. At the moment, as fine rain fell on the lawns of Tsarskoye Selo, only Paradjanov, who had earlier told *the Tsar* to stand aside to aid the composition of one of his long shots, saw the beauty.

Charles and Ekaterina were returning from a ride through the grounds, unchaperoned though Ensign Chekhov and a detachment of guards dogged their tracks, hanging back a hundred yards or so. Chekhov looked as if he would like to use his sword on someone. Security men in slick raincoats flitted through the woods like foxes, looking for snipers in the trees.

Cinzia stood under the pagoda-like marquee with a crowd of Royals and hangers-on. The Earl of Balham was subdued in the presence of his wife. The Tsar, who must be wondering whether to have Paradjanov shot or appoint him First Minister, discussed diplomocous knees with Sir Anthony Blunt. Anastasia and the Duchess of

York sighed in tandem, cooing over the couple.

Ekaterina was uncomfortable on her horse and kept shifting on her ladies' saddle, held in place mainly by the weight of her dress. Charles, raised as a rider, slouched like a cossack and looked miserable. Cinzia hoped he was miserable thinking about her.

She had not slept much last night. Her head throbbed from Sanders' vodka. Vladi's cushions were faintly scented with the Duke's hair oil.

"*Perfecto*," sighed Paradjanov. A rainbow shone through drizzle, settling a multicoloured glow around the mounted couple. "Mr Duke, lean across and kiss the Grand Duchess. Your public demands it."

The couple were startled by the demand. Cinzia thought her heart would stop as Charles bent in the saddle, bringing his lips to Ekaterina's cheek. Spooked, the Grand Duchess's horse jittered away a few yards. Ekaterina lurched badly and slipped to one side, clutching reins.

Paradjanov was pleased with the moment.

"That mount they've dug up for Chas," Balham mused. "He's not a gelding, is he?"

"I don't think so. Why?"

"It might be better if he were, Mags. Look."

Balham pointed to the monitor. Paradjanov's camera zoomed steadily in on the couple. Cinzia saw what the Earl meant. Charles's horse, obviously a stallion, was obviously aroused by Ekaterina's mare.

"The symbolism, the earthy beauties..."

Cinzia thought ITV brass might not share Paradjanov's enthusiasm for equine erections.

Charles's horse reared, waving its hoofs at the flanks of the Grand Duchess's mount. What seemed like a foot of throbbing horse penis bobbed in front of 100 million tele viewers worldwide.

Balham was laughing. He turned to his wife.

"Reminds me of our wedding snaps. Remember the one with the custard and the handcuffs."

The Tsar's impassive, bearded face flickered with rigidly suppressed humour. He issued an order and Chekhov dashed into the field to rescue the Grand Duchess.

"Can't have dear old Ek coming between true lovers," Balham said, winking at Cinzia. "It'd spoil everything."

Now, Cinzia *was* going to be sick. Charles must have told the Earl.

Chekhov gallantly scooped the Grand Duchess from her saddle and, staggering under the weight of the girl's dress, got her out of the way. Charles dismounted gracefully, showing off the curve of his rear in riding trousers, and let his horse off the rein.

The Royal horses nuzzled and manoeuvred into position. The stallion pressed the mare down, and his pole-like organ slipped neatly in.

Cinzia had to sit down. She was not sure if the pain in her stomach and heart came from trying not to laugh or trying not to cry.

"Stop filming, you Georgian exquisite!" the Tsar roared at Paradjanov. "There must be dignity in all things."

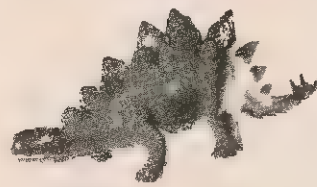
"No dignity in that," Balham said, smiling at the noisily copulating animals. "And no shame either."

Ensign Chekhov put the Grand Duchess down on the lawn and began to fan her with his handbag. She

had fainted.

Cinzia had to escape.

"Where are you off to, Cinds," Balham shouted as she ran for the gate house.



"Cinzia ... Cindy ..."

She looked up, and he was there, as cute in his riding outfit as an auricular freak could be.

She was sitting against a stegosaurus leg, racked with fear. She was afraid of going on and afraid of going back.

He took her hands and hauled her upright.

"Cinzia."

He kissed her, expertly now. There was no false moustache between them.

"This is dangerous, Charles."

She pulled him behind the model dinosaur, checking that no one could see them, and responded to his kiss. It was not wise, but it was impossible to resist.

"They'll notice you've gone. Search parties will be sent out. Worse, Sergei will happen along with his orange silk and live outside broadcast camera. You'll be seen betraying the Tsar's daughter in millions of homes."

"I don't care."

He pressed her against the stegosaurus. She was reminded of his horse.

"Of course you *care*, Charles. You told me how much you care."

He hesitated and gulped. "I love you, Cinzia Davidovna."

It was like a rabbit punch.

"And I love you, Charles Edinburgovich," she wanted to say back, wondering instantly if it were true. She kept it to herself.

She wanted this, but she knew better. She struggled, pushing his chest, fending him off.

"It's just because I'm the first *real* woman you've met, Charles. You've been spoiled by princesses. I'm not a saint, believe me."

"That's not true. I was in the Navy. When my mother was expected to inherit the throne. I've met real women."

"Girl in every port?"

"Every *British* port."

He kissed her again, his hands in her hair, his right leg pressed between hers. She felt the knobbled iron dinosaur hide against her back and did not care.

His mouth was on her throat, in her hair, tasting her, smelling her. She looked, cross-eyed, up at the canopy of branches. Perched in an old oak was a statue pterodactyl, with glass eyes like those of the Grand Duchess Anastasia.

These woods were the heart of Europe, stretching trackless across the continent. They might be alone with the extinct animals. Safe from all harm.

Her hands were under his riding jacket, loosening it from his shoulders. The buttons of her blouse were undone.

He might be a huntsman, and she a hermit's daughter. Away from the world and uncaring.

His warm mouth was on her skin above her heart.

She thought of Marie Antoinette, pretending to be a shepherdess. Of the young Nicholas walking in his Jurassic playground. Of Anastasia, lying about the past to keep people from asking about the future.

With great difficulty, fighting herself as much as him, she broke the embrace, and fastened herself up.

"I won't be a Royal mistress, Charles. Better than that."

"I don't want a mistress. I want a wife."

"You'll have one soon."

He shook his head. "Marry me, Cinzia."

"You can't ask that. You're not free."

"I'll be a king. I can do what I want."

She was crying now. "No you *can't*. No king is more powerful than the Tsar, and he had to marry whom he must."

"Then I won't be king."

She shook her head and mopped her eyes with her hankie. The world was spinning.

"*Cave canem*, Chas," shouted Balham. Cinzia realized Charles must have left the Earl as a look-out. "Tsar Nick's in a bate, and you'll be missed."

Balham loped out of the wood, a camera slung around his neck, light-meter at his hip.

"Say cheese," he smiled, snapping off a shot. "Magic memories, children."

Now, Cinzia was afraid again.

Charles stood away from her and walked towards the Earl, shoulders slumped, back bent. She knew he felt as good as she did.

And she felt horrible.

Even Balham was serious for a moment. She wondered what *his* Royal Marriage was really like.

"You stay here for a bit, love," the Earl said. "We'll see you at the picnic later."

Cinzia nodded and watched Balham and Charles walk away, through the trees towards the palace.



The ITV crew were billeted in the gatehouse, which was itself the size of several of the smaller palaces she had seen recently. Cinzia had

been given what must have been a maid's room. High up in the roof somewhere, it had a gable window the size of an icon. The child-sized bed was piled thick with eiderdowns and pillows. Lying on it, looking up at the ceiling, Cinzia felt she was sinking. The pillows would close over her, and she would be forgotten.

During the picnic – a thousand guests gussied up for the tele and endless toasts to the happy couple – she had resisted the temptation to get drunk again, and concentrated on doing her job. She went into remote control to work on Charles and Ekaterina, resisting the temptation to write "SHAM" in lipstick letters on their foreheads. Charles made one attempt to talk to her but she silenced him with a look. The Grand Duchess wanted to chat about something trivial, but Cinzia could not concentrate on it.

Now, she wanted to sleep.

It had not been this bad before, even when she found out about Allen and the gymnast. Nothing had

ever been this bad for anyone ever.

At the very edge of the picnic, staying away from the lights and the cameras, she had noticed a veiled lady, very chic, very mysterious. It was Princess Flavia, Nicholas's one-time wife and long-time mistress. She stayed away from the Tsar, who was surrounded by his children, and drifted like a ghost.

Cinzia could imagine.

Also, she was getting good at spotting the spies. Besides the men in raincoats, she knew which waiters, guests, tele crew were secret agents. It was impossible, however, to tell for whom they were spying. It might be, from what she understood of the trade of deception, that they themselves were not fully aware of who their masters were.

A tinkle resounded. There was a stand-up telephone on the night-table. This could not be good news.

She picked up and heard his voice.

"I wish I were with you, darling. In bed."

She knew what he meant. Yesterday had been the first good sex for her in nearly a year. She could do with some more.

"I wish I were your sanitary towel."

"What?" she exclaimed. "That's *ridiculous*! You wish you were my *what*? I hope this line isn't being tapped, Mr Windsor."

"Cinzia..."

"Good night and God bless."

She hung up and took the phone off the hook. Thinking about it, she put the receiver back and waited. It did not tinkle again.

She waited...



She was woken up by a knock at the door. She had fallen asleep in her clothes and not dreamed.

She could reach and open the door without getting out of bed. She huddled back against pillows as her visitor entered.

It was not who she had expected.

Sir Anthony Blunt looked down on her as if she were a forged painting. Or, worse, a real one by someone of whose work he disapproved.

"Miss Bronstein, I'll come to the point..."

"You do that," she said, prepared to be outraged.

Blunt took a manila envelope out of his jacket. It was bulked out fatly.

"One million roubles. You can count it if you like."

She felt expensive and yet cheap.

"Who do you represent?"

"Interests, Miss Bronstein. We have a great deal tied up in the Imperial Wedding, and we are not going to lose it through your wayward *amours*."

He dropped the envelope on the bed. It bounced.

"It's yours if you leave the country, and don't come back for six months. At least."

She touched the envelope as if it were a big squashed slug.

"There are other ways of dealing with you."

There was a chill in the room. She looked closely at the long face and cold eyes and was frightened. All courts had people like this: hatchet men.

"Think of it as a patriotic duty. Your influence is making the Duke of Cornwall unhappy with things that must be."

She shoved the envelope away, angrier now than she was scared.

"You've a low opinion of me, Sir Anthony."

He stepped into the room, bumping his head on the low lintel. He seemed a giant, bowed under the ceiling. His big hands reached out, long fingers closing around his money.

"You won't be missed. In a month, he won't remember your face. No one will."

"I'd advise you to be careful with your words, Anth," said a male voice, in English. Someone else stood in the door. "You never know if a room is bugged these days. Especially in the Russias."

The newcomer was Harold Philby, looking cheerfully unkempt as if he had been at the picnic all night. He had turned up before, like Blunt. They seemed to know each other. Sir Anthony froze with detestation as Philby slipped into the room.

They were all seriously cramped now.

"Hello, Miss," Philby said, kindly. "You shouldn't mind what grumpy old Anth says. He's all wind. Wouldn't hurt a fly. *Couldn't*, in fact. Not when some of us know his home truths."

Blunt might have been swallowing hemlock *frappé*.

"Don't he look British?" Philby said, nodding at Sir Anthony. He sat on the corner of the bed and patted her knee with an avuncular, conspiratorial look. "With his title and all, and so close to the dear old Royal Family. So valued, so trusted."

Blunt hissed like an angry cobra.

"He's not so trustworthy, though. Used to be a spy for the Americans. Caught Communism at Cambridge, read his Marx and Debs between punting and champagne. Ferreted out secrets and posted them off to Uncle Al Capone. During the War, he was careless and got found out. Wasn't sent down because strings were pulled on his behalf. Besides the jolly Yankee Red Americans were Allies back then. Shoulder to shoulder against the beastly Nazis and all."

"This is all very educational," Blunt said. "But..."

"How'd it be, I wonder, if I were to write it up in the *Times*. The Duchess of York's closest adviser in the pay of the Americans since the 1930s. Somebody's nice comfortable life would go down the drain. You'd make lots of close friends in prison, though."

Blunt glared fire.

"No, not a very happy thought is it, Anth. Now, beetle off back to the Duchess and the Tsar and tell them this young woman has no intention of disrupting anything."

Blunt got up and barged out, rigid with rage. Philby shrugged and smiled as the door slammed.

"Why are you doing this?" Cinzia asked.

"Think of me as a Fairy Godmother," Philby said. "No, that has *associations*. A good Samaritan, then. Fear not, all will be for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Voltaire, you know."

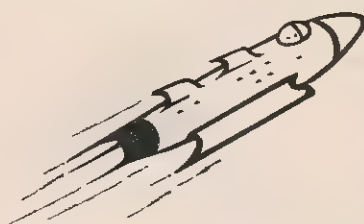
"*Candide*. And it's meant ironically."

"Good girl. Better than Charlie deserves."

She thought he might try to kiss her but he didn't.

Philby patted her knee again, got up, and slipped out of the door.

Now she was just confused.



"The Metropolitan is waiting in the chapel," the Tsar bel-lowed at the closed door of Grand Duchess Ekaterina's suite. "Paradjanov says he will lose the

light through the stained glass windows. *Katiusha*, you must come down."

Cinzia, summoned by imperial messenger, joined the queue in the corridor. The Tsar was at its head, like a desperate man waiting for his turn in the lavatory. Behind him, in full fancy dress, was Ensigh Chekhov.

Paradjanov was at a window, sternly looking at the sun, mentally forbidding it to rise further. Today, the director wore a medieval padded hunting jacket studded with tiny crystal balls, and tight-like leggings cross-gartered, with scarlet rope sandals and an embroidered codpiece.

"You, *girl*," said the Tsar, pointing at her...

...this was it, an imperial decree of banishment or death. Perhaps with torture.

"...you are the only one she will see."

Thank the Saints, it was only Ekaterina being unreasonable. She was still not found out.

"Your friend is here, *Katiusha*," said the Tsar, signalling furiously that Cinzia should approach.

The would-be autocrat of all the Russias was sweating heavily and seemed to have lost bulk. If he could not rule one daughter, his chances of ruling most of two continents were looking weaker.

There was a whining mumble from behind the door.

"We could charge when she opens up, imperial high-ness," said Chekhov, thinking like a cavalry officer. "Strike fast and establish a beachhead."

"We are trying to coax this minx to a church service, you idiot. Not mounting an offensive patrol on the Mekong Delta."

Chekhov was put in his place.

The door opened a crack and Cinzia slipped in. Ekaterina, in a shortie nightie with Misha the Bear on it, slammed and locked the door behind them. Her rooms were dark and she had obviously been crying. Last night's face was smeared.

The Grand Duchess hugged her and sobbed into her shoulder.

"There, there... um, Ekaterina."

"Call me Ek."

"There, there, Ek."

That set her sobbing again.

"He calls me Ek."

Kindly, she sat her down and began wiping her face with a tissue.

There was a serious conflict of interests here, but first she must calm this poor girl. Maybe the Grand Duchess would be less likely to ask for her head later.

"This is the worst thing that has ever happened to anyone, Cinzia. I shall have to enter a convent."

"Come on, Ek."

"No, I have been true to my heart and betrayed my country. I'm torn in two."

"There's a lot of that about."

"I can't understand it. Andropov must have *known*, but he had Pavel transferred from the space programme."

Cinzia's head hurt.

"Andropov? Of the Okhrana?"

Ekaterina nodded miserably.

"What's he to do with Ensign Chekhov?"

"Yuri Andropov is in charge of all personnel attached to the Royal household for the period of the Imperial Engagement. It's some silly security measure. When I first felt, ah, *stirrings*, I tried to have Pavel sent away. I *tried*, Cinzia. I tried to do my duty."

The kopeck was beginning to drop.

"You and Pavel, you are..."

"We are lovers, Cinzia. I could not help myself. And neither could he."

Cinzia could have been listening to herself.

"I'm so *miserable*. I don't want to be a Grand Duchess and end up a pink elephant like Great Auntie Anastasia. I want to go to Star City and watch Pavel take off in his rocketship for the final frontier. I want to go to the moon with him. I want to make love in zero gravity."

Cinzia could imagine the possibilities.

"But I have to marry this cold fish from England and live in a freezing palace in Scotland. What is to be done?"

Cinzia had often heard of people wringing their hands, but had never actually seen anybody do it. Ekaterina buried her face in slightly chubby fingers and keened like a gutted seal. It was not pretty.

Suddenly calm, Cinzia got up and unlocked the door. The Tsar's face hung outside, a mask of wretchedness. Cinzia detected a goatly smugness in Chekhov. The Grand Duchess and the cosmonaut would make an interesting couple, zero gee or not.

"Imperial Highness," Cinzia said, "there's a problem with the wedding."

At the end of the corridor, standing beside Paradjanov, was the veiled lady, Princess Flavia. Cinzia wondered if this woman would end up ruling the country.

"I think you'd better come in and listen to your daughter."



In the corridor, everyone listened. Ekaterina's tiny voice was indistinct, but the Tsar's bellow would have been clear through ten inches of lead shielding.

"What do you mean, you love someone else? Who is this foul adder of a betrayer?"

Chekhov was pale with fear.

Cinzia was quite enjoying this. It made a change for other people to have a miserable, complicated love life.

Paradjanov had given up on the chapel and summoned a crew to snatch shots of expectant courtiers. He was especially keen on images of Flavia drifting

mysteriously like a ghost past huge paintings.

To complete the cast, the crowd was swelled by Grand Duchess Anastasia and the Dowager Duchess of York, Sir Anthony Blunt (who looked at Cinzia with loathing), the Earl of Balham and Princess Margaret, Harold Philby and Yuri Andropov (spies!), some British dignitaries gone astray from the chapel, a couple of Okhrana footmen, and, at last, Charles.

"A *cosmonaut*!" yelled the Tsar.

Chekhov fell to his knees and began praying.

Charles looked at Cinzia, and she shrugged. It was possible the Imperial Engagement would fall apart without her *taking* the blame. She felt sorry for Chekhov.

"I hear an unmanned probe is leaving for Jupiter next month," Balham said to the Ensign. "Maybe you should volunteer to be on it."

There was a quiet moment.

The door opened and Tsar Nicholas issued orders. "Everybody, in here. And somebody bring me a revolver."



The Tsar looked around at the faces. Paradjanov's cameraman had hefted his instrument on his shoulder. Andropov ordered him to turn it off and, at a nod from the

director, the functionary fiddled with some switches and pointed the lens askance at the room. The little red light was still on, suggesting that for an ITV man a director outranked the Okhrana.

"I want you all to bear witness to the shame of my wretch of a daughter," thundered Nicholas. "Tell them, *Katiusha*."

"I can't go through with the marriage," Ekaterina said, directing herself to Charles. "I'm in love. With someone else."

The Grand Duchess looked at Chekhov.

"With him, in fact. Pavel Chekhov."

Anastasia fainted dead away in the arms of Sir Anthony Blunt. The Duchess of York looked intensely jealous.

"Oh dear," said the English Shadow Foreign Secretary.

Nicholas waved his revolver for emphasis. Chekhov flinched as the barrel pointed in his direction.

"Bad show, what?" Charles said. "Fearful disappointment. One will try and get over it."

He was trying not to laugh, the rat.

Balham snapped a photograph.

"One for the album there, Chas. I call it Disappointed Bridegroom."

Cinzia tried to suppress hysterical giggles and hoped the Tsar didn't notice.

With quiet determination that made her seem a little like Tsarina Tatiana, Ekaterina said, "I am prepared to give up my title to marry the man I love."

She held out her hand and took Chekhov by the glove, pulling him to her. Balham took a photograph. Paradjanov, weeping openly, nudged the cameraman to frame the shot perfectly.

Ekaterina stood up, regal in her nightie, beautiful through teary smudges, and kissed Ensign Chekhov. Anastasia, revived, fainted again.

Extraordinarily, Philby stepped in front of Paradjanov's camera and began talking in Russian.

"For those of you joining us late and expecting to see Prince Yussopoff hosting the Metropolitan's Engagement Mass from Tsarskoye Selo, we have a change of programme. In a dramatic reversal, it has been announced that questions are being asked about the impending wedding of Charles, Duke of Cornwall, and the Grand Duchess Ekaterina..."

Cinzia realized this was going out live. She had never been on television before. She suppressed an urge to wave to Mother. She would have stayed home to watch the mass and must now be as stunned as Anastasia.

The Tsar pointed his revolver at Philby's head – did he even know who the Englishman was? – but Flavia laid a hand on his arm and made him drop his aim.

"I, too, have an announcement," Charles said, in English. Philby translated for the viewers.

Paradjanov waved at a minion – *Andropov!* – to open the curtains. Glorious light flooded the room as Charles tugged Cinzia to him.

"Since my engagement to the Grand Duchess is at an end, I wish to ask Cinzia Davidovna Bronstein to be my bride."

There was cheering. Out of camera range, Flavia gave the Tsar a squeeze.

"Cinzia, will you marry one?"

The camera swerved her way.

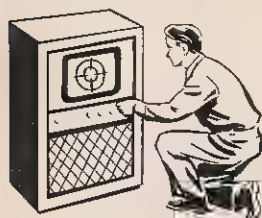
"Marry one what?"

"Um, Duke of Cornwall."

"No," she said.

Mouths fell open. Paradjanov was chewing his hat.

"I'll marry Charles Windsor," she said. "The man, not the title."



In the Happy Guys Club, Charles was recognized but not given special treatment. After all, the waiters and cigarette girls all wanted to work in tele and he could do a lot less for them than the producers and directors who

swanned through.

For the first time, the big television set in the upstairs room was tuned not to ITV but to Soyuz. Since Georgi Sanders and Isaac Asimov began to broadcast opposite ITV's *Nine O'Clock News* with an irreverent current-affairs programme called *Not A Pack of Lies*, ITV's ratings monolith had been dented. With the departure of Talia Gurdin and the defection of Yul Brynner to the movies, *The Rostovs* was pulling in fewer viewers than Soyuz' rival "realistic" beet opera, *The Lower Depths*.

Cinzia sat with Charles and Balham, watching Sanders interview Harold Philby. The Englishman explained that he had been obliged to take advantage of the situation at Tsarskoye Selo and provide a commentary on the extraordinary events that had been broadcast.

"I still don't understand what that man was up to," Cinzia said. "He seemed in with Andropov."

"I've been giving it a bit of an old think with the mighty brain-box, Cind. Putting it all together, I think I've come up with the real story."

"Everybody likes a love story, Georgi," said Philby. "I'm just a softie."

"Chas, your starter for ten," Balham began. "Who is Andropov working for? The Tsar or the politicians?"

"Pass," said Charles.

"My theory is that our Gospodin Andropov is in fact Comrade Andropov. Working for the Americans. He's a communist."

"What?" said Cinzia, "the head of the Okhrana a communist?"

"Why not? The British secret service is riddled with reds. Last year, it came out that Sir Alexander Waverly, head of MI6, was a commie. Philby used to work for Waverly."

On tele, Isaac admitted that Philby's future was shrouded in mystery. "Like my past," the Englishman commented.

"I'll bet he's a commie too. Anyway, assume Philby is a red. Doesn't it strike you queer that he and Andropov are hob-nobbing with one another?"

"What about Blunt?" Cinzia asked. "Philby told me he was the communist."

"Tones got caught. Dead embarrassing. And, unlike Philby, he's got lots to lose. If he's found dabbling in political intrigue again, he'll spend the rest of his life in the Scrubs. Blunt enjoys the life he has too much. If he had to live under communism there'd be no more champagne and fine art for him. Just Bourbon and Norman Rockwell prints. He's no more a commie now than I am. He's just the loyal servant and tool of the Dowager Duchess of York, God bless her and all who sail in her. Dear old mum-in-law."

"So they are reds," said Charles, "What were they up to?"

"Trying to put the kibosh on your nuptials, dear boy. All the time you and Ek were on tele, you were doing a propaganda job for Royals everywhere. Meanwhile, Tsar Nick was drip-dripping all this dirt on the politicians. Why do you think he owns a television station and twelve newspapers? He was, and perhaps still is, preparing a *coup d'etat*. Everyone knows that. The big wedding, with its orgy of pomp and grandeur, was to be the first step in the restoration of an absolute monarchy."

It was news to Cinzia.

"Nick was going to seize power, like Tsars of old. His nice, clean, new government could rule by decree. He'd get out of Indochina at once, which would make him hugely popular. He'd also send every corrupt politician and bureaucrat to Siberia and crack down on any discontent. Russia would effectively become a dictatorship. It'd be unpleasant but, for the next few years at least, very efficient. Nick is not an idiot. He'd be a very effective ruler. The gnomes in Debs D.C. would far prefer it if their rival superpower was run by incompetent crooks."

"And they achieve this by stopping my marriage to the Grand Duchess?"

"Not completely, but it goes a long way towards it. Now the wedding is off, the masses realize you and Ek

were never in love. They see what a sham the whole thing was. People who were loyal monarchists realize they've been sold a lie by the Tsar's own tele station. They won't like that. They'll start looking to the politicians for their salvation again. Stupid bastards."

"But this is ridiculous. The plot didn't stop the wedding. Charles and Ekaterina stopped it. They realized they didn't love one another and it would have been hypocritical and damaging to go through with it."

"Pish and fiddlesticks, Cinds. Most royal weddings are between people who don't love one another. Am I right, Chas, or am I right?"

"Most," Charles admitted.

"Remember, Blunt tried to keep you out of the picture. Philby's job was to mark him and jolly you two together. At the same time, Andropov saw to it that the handsome young hussar officer Ek had a crush on was returned to Petrograd to be right at her side just as she was about to marry someone else. They didn't stoop to assassination to stop the wedding, just provided the happy couple with happier alternatives. My guess is that the plotters concentrated on Pavel the Patsy and you were just an unexpected opportunity they took advantage of."

Charles raised his champagne flute and toasted "God bless the USSA."

She looked around, wondering if anyone heard. Harlan, the American attaché, was distracted from chatting up an Olympic skater and grinned at them.

"I feel like a puppet in a show," she said, almost annoyed.

"I've felt like that for most of my life," said Charles. "But not now."

"Won't Ekaterina's marriage to the handsome ensign prove just as popular with the masses? When they polled people on tele, everyone wanted to see her happy."

Balham smiled slyly. "But, Cinzia, you must have seen how tiny Chekhov looks on tele, surrounded by all the scrambled egg."

Shiploads of Imperial Engagement souvenirs had been recalled and reissued with Chekhov's face stuck over Charles's. The ensign would transfer back to the space programme after the wedding and had requested a moon mission.

"And have you noticed how Ek cosies up to that young Austrian they brought in as a bodyguard?"

"Leutnant Schwarzenegger?"

"The very same. If I were that Asimov chappie, I'd foresee storm clouds over that marriage."

"Isaac has been right about some things," she said.

Charles held her hand. They would return to Britain for a decent period and then have a quiet wedding in Westminster Abbey, which Cinzia understood was quite small. She had to convert to the Church of England, which would probably set Grandfather a-spin in his grave.

Mother would be moving back with them, and Vladi – who wanted Brynner to play him in the Paradjanov miniseries *Anastasia* was writing about *l'affaire Cinzia* – said he would consider moving to Britain if the obligation to perform National Service were waived.

Another bottle arrived, complements of Harlan.

Cinzia doubted Charles had ever bought champagne in his life.

"Oh good," said Balham to the pretty waitress. "Can we have the fish eggs with that, there's an antelope. And don't tell me fish eggs are off, love."

Harlan grinned. In the dark corner with the Ice Queen and the attaché.

"Cheers, you scheming commie bastards," Balham toasted.

"So who won?" she asked.

"We did," said Charles.

They toasted each other and drank. The Earl washed down a lump of caviar with champagne.

"Cindy," he gulped, "has the future King of England taught you the English National Anthem?"

"I already know it, my Mother taught me. She's English, remember. *God save our gracious King, long live our noble ...*"

"No, not that one," interrupted Balham, cackling. "The real one."

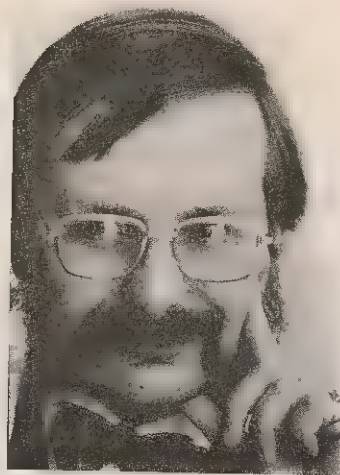
Charles and the Earl looked at each other, wickedness sparking in their eyes, and began to shrill at the tops of their voices, startling everyone in the room.

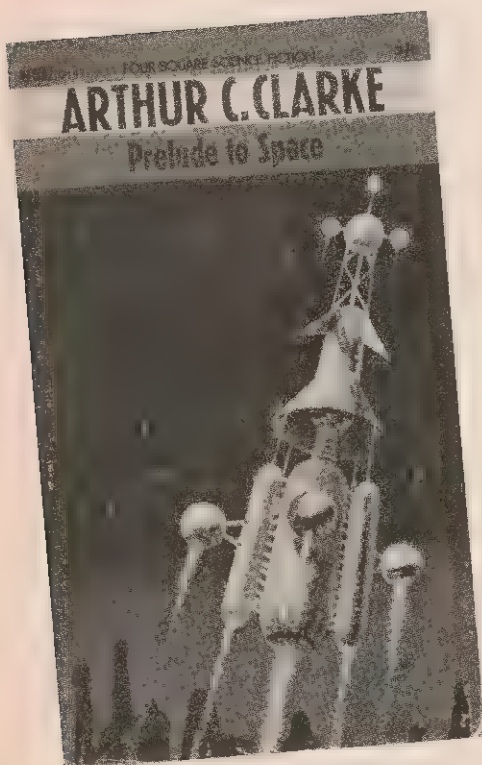
"Ying tong ying tong ying tong ying tong ying tong iddle-eye-po ..."

Eventually, she joined in.

Kim Newman (right) & Eugene Byrne have written three previous collaborative stories for *Interzone*: "In the Air" (issue 43), "Ten Days That Shook the World" (issue 48) and "Tom Joad" (issue 65).

The above new story, their longest to date, is set in the same alternative world – a timeline where America went communist in 1917, and Russia didn't – but it's set on a different continent from the other tales and has a completely new cast list. Kim and Eugene hope to turn the entire series into a book before long.





“ Behaving on a... [high] moral level were the astronauts who went to the Moon, for their actions tend toward the survival of the entire race of mankind... Many shortsighted fools think that going to the Moon was just a stunt. But the astronauts knew the meaning of what they were doing. ”

Robert A. Heinlein
Analog editorial 1974

Spaceflight is perhaps the archetypal trope of science fiction, its fictional purpose being to symbolize release from the boundaries of the present. But sf writers dealing with spaceflight have, in the last few decades, suffered the peculiar disadvantage of having their visions tested by a reality which developed in unexpected ways. How has the sf field responded to the evolving reality of the Space Age?

In the middle of the 20th century, as the Space Age neared, authors began to reflect the fact that the first space travellers would not be supermen of a remote and unspecified space-operatic future, but rather “ordinary” people – the first of them probably already alive – and the first spacecraft would be a direct extension of technology then extant, such as the von Braun V2.

Arthur C. Clarke’s first novel *Prelude to Space* (1951), set in 1978, described in great technical detail a large-scale project to send a rocket to the Moon. *Prelude* is very dated, of course, not just in its technology – particularly its depiction of the enchanting two-stage nuclear moonship *Prometheus*, crammed with vacuum tubes – but also in its underlying cultural assumptions. The

moon flight is predominantly British, and funded privately – by a write-in campaign organized by a close clone of the British Interplanetary Society! And the establishment of the moonship’s Fireball XL5-style takeoff rail at a site recognizably like Woomera in Australia – thus spraying radioactive gas across Aboriginal homelands – makes us, today, uneasy. *Prelude* closes with a typical Clarkeian uplifting gaze into a better future, and it strikes us now as a dream of the young Clarke, staunchly British and a stalwart of the BIS, and in many ways it is exquisitely nostalgic for a future that never was, and probably – even projecting forward from 1951 – could never have been.

In a later, more assured short work,

Rusting Gantries and Lawn Ornaments

“Cape Canaveral
has gone now, its gantries
rising from the deserted
dunes. Sand has come in
across the Banana River,
filling the creeks and turning
the old space complex into
a wilderness of swamps
and broken concrete...”

J. G. Ballard

“The Dead Astronaut” 1968

Science Fiction
and the
Space Age

Stephen Baxter

"Venture to the Moon" (1956), Clarke depicts a joint US-Soviet-British lunar voyage. The story is full of numbers, as were so many of its type: "at our five-hundred-mile altitude, we took ninety-five minutes to make one circuit of the Earth..." In retrospect, Clarke's gentleman-astronauts are far too sensitive, well equipped, and in control. Nevertheless Clarke did manage to foreshadow some of the less welcome aspects of the future, such as commercialization, and the censoring of astronauts' fruity language by broadcasters.

Such real-life pioneers as Wernher von Braun were not above publishing propagandizing fiction. My treasured 1966 *Astronauts Book*, from Panther Books ("The Space Age book written and illustrated by the Space pioneers themselves!") contains an (undated) story by von Braun called "Moon Shot." The story, not accurate in all respects, does feature several of the real-life aspects of the programme over which von Braun was to have such an influence: the extensive simulations, staging, the plastic-wrapped food. On the Moon's surface the astronauts collect rocks and perform their simple experiments, their lack of control over their own actions well anticipated: "they kept rigidly to the schedule that had been prepared before they took off." And they are singularly unmoved by it all. Despite the gratuitous insertion of a couple of crises – "Carter was just floating back to the pantry for a snack when there was a violent explosion" – and taking into account the limitations of von Braun as a fiction author, "Moon Shot" is remarkably undramatic: an unintentional foreshadowing of reality.

Similarly George Pal's film *Destination Moon* (1950), scripted in part by Robert Heinlein, does its best, with the aid of Chesley Bonestell paintings, to predict the coming lunar voyages. But the film is low-key and – like the real thing – colourless and unexciting. Here Heinlein – like Clarke, and as in his own story "The Man Who Sold the Moon" (1950) – predicted a private rather than state funding of the Moon flight. Heinlein was wrong in the short term, but in the longer term – that is, our own near future – he may prove to have been correct after all.

Rather more fun was the space adventure of Hergé's Tintin, in *Explorers on the Moon* (1954). The plot, aimed at children, features a crisis on each page and no less than three stowaways on the V2-shaped nuclear Moon rocket. But Hergé went to great lengths to get the technical details of his voyage right. We are treated to countdowns, take-off G-

forces, spacesuits, a failing air-supply, a lunar rover, and weightlessness: "my whisky's rolled itself into a ball!" And Tintin's words, as he becomes the first man on the Moon, are eerily prophetic: "Now I'm descending the ladder... Only a few more rungs... This is it!... I've walked a few steps!... For the first time in the history of mankind there is an

West gunfight on the lunar surface, all with an ease which, with retrospect, seems absurd.

More interesting is Sutton's *Apollo at Go* (1963). Written just five years later, this is a precise depiction of an Apollo lunar voyage based on the designs then extant. Considering that it was still five years before any Apollo would fly, the details Sutton was able to give were remarkably close to the real thing in many areas: the launch sequence, transposition and docking with the Lunar Module (LM), a landing at the Apollo 12 site of the Ocean of Storms, even the date of the mission (right to within a couple of weeks). It makes it clear that much of the US astronautic development of the 1960s was a question of confirming decisions which had already been made.

There are some differences, though: the design of the LM was still fluid, and Sutton's LM has big helicopter windows and seats, neither of which made it to the final design. The landing is in the lunar night, and the astronauts are surprisingly poorly trained. The President considerably makes his phone call during the flight out, rather than waste time during the moonwalk.

Sutton's prose tends to let him down at the crucial moments. Reading the climactic scene of the first small steps, as the astronauts climb down their rope ladder, makes one realize how lucky we were to have Armstrong:

"Look, Joe... first human footstep on the Moon. I feel like Robinson Crusoe when he found the footstep in the sand."

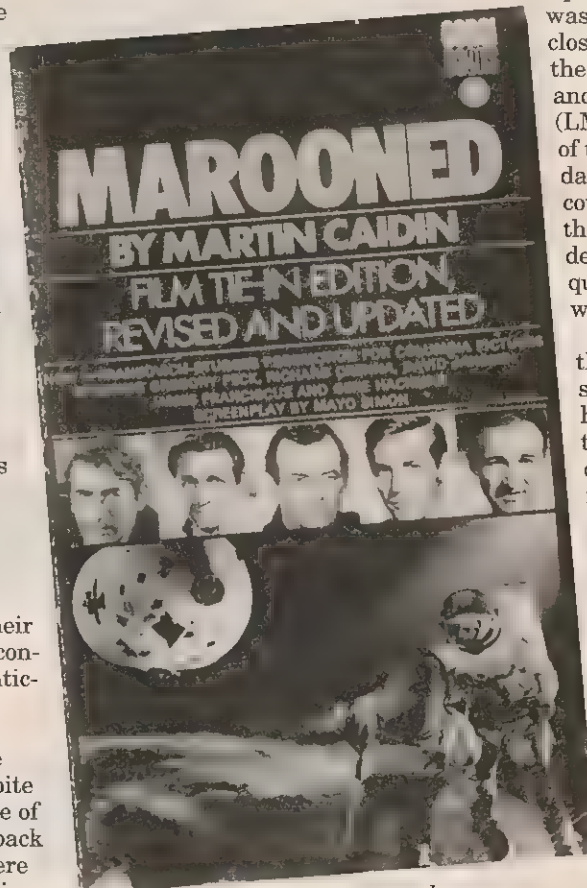
"Except that this is your footstep, Max. The first."

"The first..."

"Today on 8 July, 1969, at 11:10 pm Eastern Standard Time, Major Max Kovac, United States Air Force, pressed his foot against the Moon. His first words were: *First human footstep on the Moon...*"

They should have left it to Tintin. (But at least this is more palatable than the first words spoken by the pioneering lunar conquistador of *First on the Moon*: "I, Adam Crag, by the authority vested in me by the Government of the United States of America, do hereby claim this land, and all the lands of the Moon, as legal territory of the United States of America, to be a dominion of the United States of America, subject to its Government and laws...")

The science of the *Apollo At Go* mission is, of course, is negligible: a few samples are scraped up, some photos randomly snapped, to give the "double domes" and "egg-heads" some-



explorer on the Moon!" The whole thing is beautifully illustrated, with excellent depictions of the Moon itself, and closes poignantly: "...and upon the shadowy world a few footsteps remain..."

US writer Jeff Sutton was a journalist and ex-Marine; he died in 1969. His best works were near-future thrillers. His first novel was *First on the Moon* (1958), a lurid thriller written in an era when the first Sputniks and Explorers had barely lifted above the atmosphere, and the shape of the coming manned space programme was barely imaginable. And yet Sutton clearly perceived, correctly, the motivation for the coming race: the suppressed conflict between East and West, and the desire to claim the Moon's supposed mineral resources as national property. Sutton's chemical rockets race to plant the first flag on the Moon – before the first nuclear rocket arrives, bearing the UN Secretary General who will adjudicate over sovereignty claims. The protagonists plant stowaways on each others' ships, shoot each other down, improvise long-stay shelters and enjoy Wild

thing to think about; for the astronauts the purpose of the mission is mere accomplishment. And once again there is an odd sense of meaninglessness, a kind of premonitory anticlimax; as soon as they land the astronauts seem bored, chatting of the ticker-tape parades to come, and Sutton feels forced to inject drama by a series of fake crises: the astronauts discover life in a lunar crevice, and the orbiting Command Module pilot is killed by a meteorite, forcing the hero commander to lasso Apollo in lunar orbit...

In the midst of all this technical prediction, other writers were beginning to explore the softer, human boundaries of space. If the first astronauts will be ordinary middle Americans, how will it *feel* to be one of them? – or to be the parent/wife/son of one? A good example is Ray Bradbury's "The End of the Beginning" (1956) in which a mid-western father breaks off mowing the lawn long enough to watch the launch of the rocket carrying his son, Bob, to the first space station: "They placed two wicker rockers in the centre of the lawn, and sat quietly as the stars dissolved out of darkness."

Another take is Arthur Clarke's "Hate" (1961), in which the Russian-loathing protagonist kills the occupant of a crashed Soviet space capsule. At the story's climax the capsule is opened like an egg, to reveal a dead human enfolded within technology and political symbol: "...she was neither a Russian nor the first human being to have seen the far side of the Moon; she was merely the girl that he had killed."

As the Space Age became a matter of the present day, space provided the setting for what we would now call technothrillers. In Hank Searls's *The Pilgrim Project* (1964) the race to the Moon is reduced to its desperate essentials: a US astronaut takes a one-way trip in an adapted Mercury capsule, only to find the corpse of a young girl cosmonaut on the surface. The book is a melodrama but contains good documentary detail, and was later filmed (updated to Gemini technology) by Robert Altman as *Countdown* (1968). The film is a success, despite the upbeat ending tacked on at the behest of the studio.

Martin Caidin is a US pilot and aerospace specialist who has enjoyed a long career in sf: his best-known work of fiction is probably *Cyborg* (1972), which formed the basis for the TV series *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1973-78). But more typical Caidin is *Marooned* (1964, filmed in 1969 by John Sturges), which shows a Mer-

cury astronaut stranded in orbit when his retro-pack fails; the film was updated to feature Apollo, and a new edition of the book written accordingly. *Marooned* is a good documentary work of the Mercury-Vostok programmes, and the values of the time; the original edition was praised as such in NASA's official history of the Mercury programme, *This New Ocean*, and the film, with its depiction of Soviet cosmonauts assisting in the rescue of US astronauts, is said to have inspired the Apollo-Soyuz joint flight of 1975 which was intended to test out a mutual docking system.

Caidin's style is an odd mixture of technical detail and lurid prose: "Instantly Stoney barked out the command. 'Direct delta V switch!' Pruett had already moved. His hand grasped the Delta V switch and jerked it out and up. Nothing. Buzz slammed his finger again and again into the thrust-on button..."



But Caidin does strive for technical feasibility, as projected from the technology of his day, and takes account of such arcane mysteries as orbital planes, launch windows and pad checkouts.

Caidin's lesser-known *Four Came Back* (1968) dramatizes life aboard a 1972 space station built (as was projected at the time) from expended Saturn V second and third stages. The real-life problems of extended-duration missions are anticipated well; but the plot, about a resolute

hero-astronaut coping with a mysterious plague, creaks like the space station's rivets, and Caidin's handling of characters is much less expert than of technology: "[she] was a scientist, but she was first a woman – a beautiful warm creature, her body made for love..." The climax of this book is interesting in that even the technophile Caidin predicted a violent public reaction, an outburst of fear and loathing, if such a danger as a space plague were made known: "Helicopters airlifted astronauts' families... only minutes before the homes went up in flames... The Manned Spacecraft Centre went under a state of siege..."

Apollo-era space projects, with their intrinsic elements of experimentation, risk and superpower confrontation, provided plenty of tension for the thriller writers without much need for invention. The handling of the Space Shuttle has been different.

In the novel *Orbit* by Thomas Block (1982) a hypersonic airliner gets its rocket boosters stuck on maximum and finishes up in orbit. In a moralistic climax, an ambitious astronaut's carelessness makes a Shuttle rescue impossible, and the NASA administrator's cavalier attitude to safety and lives is found out... and the airplane deorbits by lowering its landing gear. This is pulp fiction, and the premise is fundamentally implausible, but at least the technical depiction of Shuttle operations is reasonably realistic.

More often – particularly before Challenger – the spaceplane is depicted as an all-purpose wonder vehicle, a kind of Supercar of space, on which extravagant and unlikely plots may be hung. The film *Starflight One* (1983, directed by Jerry Jameson) shares a startlingly similar premise to *Orbit*, but this time the Shuttle flies three rescue missions in 48 hours: "Columbia has lift-off, after a record turnaround time of 2 hours!" NASA is depicted in a heroic light, and much emphasis is made of the Shuttle's beauty and grace; but the film is dreadful, with cardboard characters, careless editing, and risible special effects. The ludicrous *Moonraker* (1979, directed by Lewis Gilbert), the eleventh James Bond, featured the Shuttle being hijacked from atop its 747 carrier. Later, another Shuttle carries laser-equipped US marines into an orbital assault against a world-threatening, radar-invisible space habitat...

Perhaps the problem is that because it looks so good, it's hard to believe the Shuttle is really no more than a limited low-orbit truck.

Much sf of the early Space Age continued to follow the dream of

von Braun and the Campbell school: that man's expansion into space would be an orderly, linear affair, proceeding without pause, leading towards a new evolution. Thus the reality of spaceflight would be an extension of the noble dreams of sf, with the symbolic release from imaginative boundaries being transformed into actual fact: "Tonight, he thought, even if we fail with this first, we'll send a second and a third ship and move on out to all the planets and later, all the stars..." ("The End of the Beginning", Bradbury.)

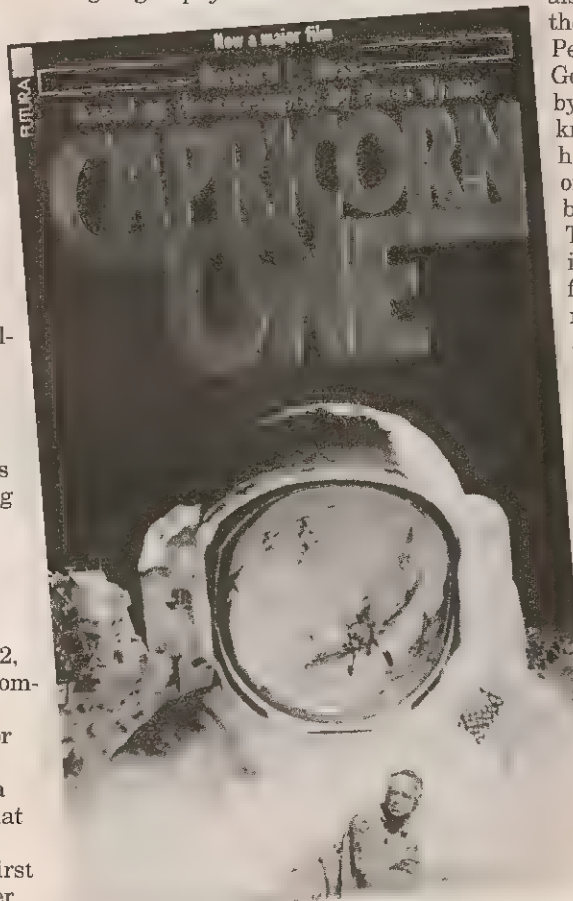
But there was some foreshadowing of the problems to come. In a remarkable story called "Death and the Senator," written in 1961, Arthur C. Clarke looked ahead to a 1976 in which the US space programme has suffered public apathy and political hostility: "Now that the urgency of the early sixties was over, the public was asking 'Why?'... We've shot billions of dollars into space. And with what result? So that a mere handful of men can spend a few uncomfortable hours outside the atmosphere..." Clarke's response is dramatized by the plight of a dying US senator, a Proxmire-like long-time opponent of the space programme, who could be saved by techniques developed on a Soviet space station. Ironically this story was itself read as evidence, in 1972, to the House of Representatives Committee on Astronautics.

But few sf writers anticipated, or could accept, the odd truth: that space travel would turn out to be a cramped, rather dull affair, and that the public would turn away from spaceflight almost as soon as the first lunar landing was achieved. A later work of Clarke's, "Transit of Earth" (1971), depicts astronauts stranded on Mars in 1984 giving up their life support so that one of their number can witness the transit of Earth across the face of the sun. The story is beautiful, and, with its dependence on technical detail for its setting and dramatic situation, classic hard sf. But it is out of its time: by 1971 we knew that astronauts did not have the opportunity to greet death nobly, or lyrically, still less joyously ("Johann Sebastian, here I come"). "Transit" is itself poignant, an attempt by Clarke to reconnect with a dream already lost.

As the Space Age developed, some sf workers, perhaps on the fringe, began to explore less savory aspects of it – the inhumanity, Big-Brother media manipulation, the perceived meaninglessness of the projects.

Barry N. Malzberg's *The Falling Astronauts* (1971) features all-too-human space travellers, caught up in a dehumanizing programme, falling

prey to very believable failings: homophobia in the capsule's confines, impulses to expose themselves during telecasts, a maddening desire to abandon comrades cavorting on the lunar surface. "The engineering was fine, there was a little problem with the men but who cares about that?" There is a strong element of blame – of complicity and revenge – in Malzberg's thinking: "There's finally going to be a reckoning and ... you're going to pay. All of



you. The agency for the agency's sake and the rest of you because you tolerated it."

Malzberg's novel is difficult, sarcastic and bleak, and clumsy in places, but it is a real attempt to explore the human truth many suspected lurked beneath NASA's propaganda, and which was to reveal itself in the fragmented lives of the real moonwalkers, left stranded on Earth after the collapse of the programme. Malzberg went on to explore these themes again in *Revelations* (1972) and *Beyond Apollo* (1972); the latter caused much controversy when it won the John W. Campbell Memorial Award. Indeed, the Space Age polarized sf. To Malzberg, naive Campbellian sf may actually have been responsible for the dehumanizing aspects of the Space Age – and therefore, indirectly, responsible for its demise. "[It] is worth thinking about exactly how much of the project... has been put together by people influenced primarily by the view of the world

which was in the [old sf] pulp stories..." (*The Falling Astronauts*.) No wonder that some regarded Malzberg's work as "the epitome of everything that has gone wrong with sf" (Bob Shaw on *Beyond Apollo*), or that Malzberg later chose to move away from the sf audience. But in his dystopian sourness Malzberg was perhaps more in tune with the average American than his Campbellian peers.

The Big-Brother aspect of NASA was also explored, in cartoon fashion, in the film *Capricorn One* (1977, director Peter Hyams, novelized by Ron Goulart in the U.S. and in the U.K. by Bernard L. Ross, now better known as Ken Follet). Apollo-era hardware is used to depict a landing on Mars – but the landing is faked by a NASA unwilling to risk failure. The premise could make an intriguing paranoid black comedy, but the film (and the book) dissolve into meandering action sequences as agents of the military-industrial complex pursue a trio of astronauts (including O. J. Simpson!) across the desert. Bizarrely, NASA cooperated fully in the making of the film.

Perhaps the most startling contemporary perspective on the Space Age came in the work of J. G. Ballard. In a series of stories dating from 1962 onwards, eight of which were collected in the Arkham House volume *Memoirs of the Space Age* (1988), Ballard explored the wider aspects of the space programme – psychological, mythic, poetic, evolutionary. Typically Ballardian post-technological motifs recur: the rusting gantries of an abandoned, rubbish-strewn Cape Canaveral, the empty swimming pools and motels, the dead astronauts marooned in still-orbiting capsules.

In the earliest of the stories, "The Cage of Sand" (1962), Cape Canaveral has been drowned by red Martian sand: the sand is a counterbalance to the damage to Earth's mass and orbit done by the launches that took place from there. This argument has the trappings of hard-sf pseudoscience, but Ballard's intention is symbolic, his work in dialogue with Campbellian sf. Similarly, Ballard's treatment of astronaut death as a grubby, human affair, is at variance with the lyrical cold-equation elegance of Clarke's "Transit of Earth", for example – and yet, ironically, more powerful in its emotional impact: "these blackened fragments of collar-bone and shin, kneecap and rib, were the unique relics of the Space Age, as treasured as the saintly bones of medieval shrines." ("The Dead Astronaut", 1968.)

Madness and obsession abound. In "My Dream of Flying to Wake Island" (1974) the protagonist has partial astronaut memories: perhaps space travel has destroyed his sanity, or perhaps space travel itself is an insanity. In "The Man Who Walked on the Moon" (1985) a delusion of space travel is developed as a metaphor for human isolation. "Myths of the Near Future" (1982) depicts an agoraphobic illness brought to Earth by the astronauts. And in "News from the Sun" (1981) we meet an aged, Earth-bound moonwalker, his mind disintegrated, lost in fugues and dreams of spaceflight.

To Ballard, space travel is more than a folly; it may be an evolutionary catastrophe. Perhaps space and time are constructs of our limited minds, not there to be "explored" at all; in many of Ballard's stories disorders of *time* flow from attempts to travel in *space*. "Perhaps the right to travel through space belonged to another order of beings..." ("News from the Sun"). And as in the work of Malzberg there is a strong sense of blame, of just rewards visited upon mankind.

"Memories of the Space Age" (1982) is a fantastic coalescing of these themes. We are once more amid the rusting gantries: Florida is evacuated; Cape Canaveral has become an "evil place," a presage of the coming "world without time." Meanwhile, a murderous ex-astronaut is squatting inside the ruins of an abandoned Shuttle...

Ballard's space stories are clever, enigmatic, intriguing, sometimes baffling, a complex exploration of the collision between man and space machine. The stories were bewildering when first published, to the point that some rejected them, and the rest of Ballard's *oeuvre*, as science fiction. In retrospect, it could be argued that Ballard's stories are too fantastic for their subject matter; the true story of the Space Age is surreal enough without any fictional assistance.

The lingering death of the beautiful dream of space has been hard to take for many in the sf community, and in later works writers have struggled to express their sense of loss.

In "The Gates of Babel" (1989), J. R. Dunn explores public indifference to space by dramatizing how it might have been if the turning away had been imposed from outside. Aliens are dismantling Jupiter, and by some unspecified means – have made us incapable of conceiving of space travel, and so of going out to challenge them. The space facilities slowly decay, maintained by a resis-

tant handful: "[The Titan booster] was in three parts, sheet-metal tubes about ten feet in diameter and ninety feet long... They had broken a little more than halfway down, and the other ends, hidden from McCune, leaned against the platform and jutted toward the sky..." This is a flawed story, at times oddly unvisual, and with the aliens' powers a convenient device (if they can take Jupiter apart, would they really need to worry about us?). But the post-Ballardian images of rusting, uncomprehended space hardware are haunting.

A much more subtle evocation of Space-Age sense of loss comes in Dan Simmons's *Phases of Gravity* (1989). This is a beautiful and carefully researched description of the plight of Baedeker, a grounded moonwalker. The poignancy of our turning away from space is translated well into Baedeker's own situation: the meaninglessness of his post-Apollo career, his failed personal life, the embarrassingly low-key and tacky public remembrances of his mission. *Phases of Gravity* is not, perhaps, really sf – apart from a few fantastical

killed those seven people as surely as if we had put guns to their heads..."

And in the work of some others, such anger is the dominant note.

In Ben Bova's *Privateers* (1985), Heinlein-esque Competent Man hits back.

"The Americans got tired... They shouldered the burdens of the world for almost a century, and then got tired of the job. They tried to take the easy way out..." Industrialist and womanizer Dan Randolph, impatient of his country's retreat from space in the face of Soviet hegemony, operates space industrial facilities under a Venezuelan flag. When the Soviets attempt to close him down he resorts to space piracy. This book is enjoyable, escapist nonsense, and spectacularly wrong in its projection of its own near future. When the US president counsels patience, predicting the implosion of the Communist system, hero Randolph contradicts her abusively. But of course Communism had collapsed by the time of publication of the sequel *The Empire Builders* (1993) – Dan Randolph saves the world from global warming but

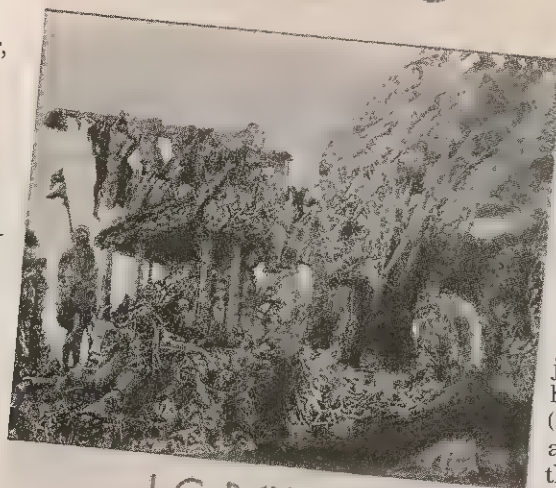
Bova sails serenely on regardless, with "Soviet" find-and-replaced by "Russian."

Similarly G. C. Edmondson's *The Man Who Corrupted Earth* (1980) is entertaining propaganda about a businessman who buys up NASA's disused Space Shuttles.

Perhaps the ultimate expression of post-Campbellian bafflement and fury comes in the work of Jerry Pournelle, Larry Niven and their collaborators. The essential Niven/Pournelle thesis is Heinlein's eggs-in-one-basket argument: without spaceflight we won't be prepared when the ice age comes (*Fallen Angels*, 1991, with Michael Flynn), or the aliens invade (*Footfall*, 1985) ("as long as they control space, they can find junk to hit us with..."), or the comet hits Earth (*Lucifer's Hammer*, 1977) ("in ten more years we'd have been able to push the damned thing out of the way!").

In Niven and Pournelle's analysis, expounded in books which became increasingly self-indulgent, xenophobic and rancorous – but wish-fulfilling and popular – the decline of the space programme must be somebody's fault. They even blame NASA: "The Saturn Five was the most powerful rocket ever built... and now it's a lawn ornament..." (*Fallen Angels*). These authors betray no understanding of, or any real interest in, the complex web of social, political, technical and economic forces which have acted to shape the Space Age. And, of course, the expenditure of a few lives is

MEMORIES OF THE SPACE AGE



J. G. BALLARD

moments of transcendence rather, it is a historical novel. But I know of no better fictional treatment of the plight of the stranded moonwalker, "imprisoned within a dreary sense of heaviness, of entropy and gravity triumphant."

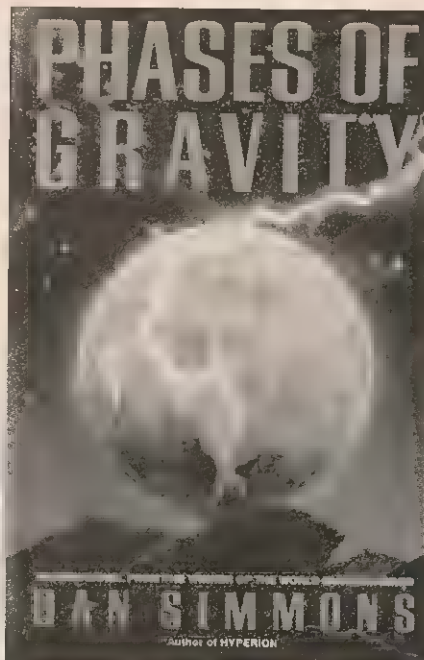
Within his lyricism, though, Simmons shows traces of anger: at NASA, budget-paring politicians, an uncomprehending public. Of Challenger, Baedeker says, "Every step of the way there was a compromise... We

always justified: "With fewer safety precautions the United States could have reached the Moon a little sooner, done a great deal more exploring, learned more, and, yes, created a martyr or two" (*Lucifer's Hammer*). And when the crisis comes, people shed illusions and revert, unpleasantly, to libertarian stereotypes: "Am I looking for a big strong man to take care of me? Would that be such a bad idea?..." "And I was trying to stop atomic plants. I should have been screaming for atomic plants to power laser rockets!" (both quotes from *Footfall*).

In the late collaboration *Fallen Angels*, these themes are developed to extremes.

In the near future the Greens have taken over the Earth ("mundanes... people with no imagination... people who couldn't imagine space travel even after it had happened"), leaving a last group of technophiles precariously inhabiting the Russian Mir space station. Two crashlanded astronauts are rescued by science fiction fandom (!), a secret community keeping alive the Campbellian flame.

There are some enjoyable scenes, for example the launch of the last Shuttle – "the fighting in Mission Control [was] hand to hand" – and in other hands this scenario might have made for a neatly ironic black comedy. But there is no irony here. Those who hold opposing views to the authors are satirized, sometimes viciously, as stupid, incompetent, criminal, decadent. The book is a sustained rant, the roar of thwarted technocrats who have learned nothing since 1969; it is



one sad but logical conclusion of the Campbellian tradition.

With the success of the film *Apollo 13* (director Ron Howard, 1995), we have in a sense come full circle.

Apollo 13 gives the story of Jim Lovell's ill-fated moon flight the modern Hollywood treatment, and the result, if simplified in some places, is a good and pretty faithful depiction of the mission. But just as with its long-ago predecessors, the film lacks drama, oddly. Sometimes, in fact, the drama is generated synthetically, with an emphasis on countdowns, the needle quivering at the critical point on the dial of

the CO2 meter. There is humour, to lighten the tension, but sometimes the audience actually laughs too much, as calamity piles on calamity.

The special effects are wonderful, with never-before-seen views of the Saturn V launch – staging, for example – and for authenticity Howard filmed zero-G sequences in the "Vomit Comet" NASA's parabolic-trajectory weightlessness trainer. But Howard used no actual NASA footage; everything was recreated with sfx, and it is bizarre to reflect on the way that our miraculous but somewhat decadent modern computer technology has been used to recreate the heroic technology of a receding past.

The Space Age has moved past the sf field like a Saturn rocket past a gantry camera's fish-eye lens: its shape constantly changing, the whole never really understood.

There has been a collision between the old sf dreams and the realities, generally at the expense of the dreams. The mythical significance of spaceflight – escaping from the closed boundary of the here and now – has survived, but only by being transferred to far-future tales of interstellar flight, such as Poul Anderson's *Tau Zero* (1970). And for us, stranded in an unanticipated future, it is perhaps in Malzberg's ravings or Ballard's fragmentary, enigmatic stories – and not in more conventional sf – that we are able to perceive the deepest truth: for us, rusting Moon-rocket gantries are the stuff of documentary, not fiction.

Stephen Baxter



Collage of illustrations by J.K. Potter from 'Memories of the Space Age'

“Get moving, you old bastard.” Bart went around the room, his white jacket already stained by some yellow fluid, and he de-opaqueted the windows with brisk slaps.

It took him a while to figure out where he was. It often did nowadays. So he just lay there. He’d been in the same position all night, and he could feel how his body had worn a groove in the mattress. He wondered if Bart had ever seen *Psycho*. “I thought –” His mouth was dry, and he ran his tongue over his wrinkled gums. “You know, for a minute I thought I was back there. Like before.”

Bart was just clattering around at the bedside cabinet, pulling out clothes, and looking for his stuff: a hand towel, soap, medication, swabs. Bart never met your eyes, and he never watched out for the creases on your pants.

“My father was there.” Actually he didn’t know what in hell his father was doing up there. “The sunlight was real strong. And the ground was a kind of gentle brown, depending on which way you looked. Autumn colours. It looked like a beach, come to think of it.” He smiled. “Yeah, a beach.” That was it. His dream had muddled up the memories, and he’d been simultaneously 39 years old, and a little kid on a beach, running towards his father.

“Ah, Jesus.” Bart was poking at the sheet between his legs. His hand came up dripping. Bart pulled apart the top of his pyjama pants. He crossed his arms over his crotch, but he didn’t have the strength to resist. “You old bastard,” Bart shouted. “You’ve done it again. You’ve pulled out your fucking catheter again. You filthy old bastard.” Bart got a towel and began to swab away the piss.

He saw there was blood in the thick golden fluid. *Goddamn surgeons. Always sticking a tube into one orifice or another.* “I saw my buddy jumping around, and I thought he looked like a human-shaped beach ball, all white, bouncing across the sand...”

Bart slapped at his shoulder, hard enough to sting. “When are you going to get it into your head that nobody gives a flying fuck about that stuff? Huh?” He swabbed at the mess in the bed, his shoulders knotted up. “Jesus. I ought to take you down to the happy booth right now. Old bastard.”

Like a beach. Funny how I never thought of that before. It had taken him 50 years, but he was finally making sense of those three days. More sense than he could make of where he was now, anyhow. Not that he gave a damn.

Bart cleaned him up, dressed him, and fed him with some tasteless pap. Then he dumped him in a chair in the day room. Bart stomped off, still muttering about the business with the catheter.

Asshole, he thought.

The day room was a long, thin hall, like a corridor. Nothing but a row of old people. Every one of them had his own tiny TV, squawking away at him. Or her. It was hard to tell. Every so often a little robot nurse would come by, a real R2-D2 type of thing, and it would give you a coffee. If you hadn’t moved for a while, it would check your pulse with a little metal claw.

In the

MSOB

Stephen Baxter

You had to set the TV with voice commands, and he never could get the hang of that; he’d asked for a remote, but they didn’t make them any more. So he just had his set tuned to the news channels, all day. Sometimes there was news about the programme. Mostly about the dinky little unmanned rovers that the Agency was rolling around Mars these days, that you could work from earth, like radio-operated boats at Disney World. Now, that was pure bullshit, as far as he was concerned. But there wasn’t even anybody up in LEO nowadays. Not since *Atlantis* tore itself up in that lousy landing, and the Russians let what was left of *Mir* fall back into the atmosphere.

He tried to read. You could still get paper books, although it cost you to get them printed out. But by the time he’d gotten to the bottom of the page he would forget what was at the top; and he’d doze off, and drop the damn thing. Then the fucking R2-D2 would roll over to see if he was dead.

The door behind him was open, letting in dense, smoggy air. Nobody was watching him. Nobody but old people, anyhow.

He got out of his chair. Not so hard, if you watched your balance. He leaned on his frame and set off towards the door.

The day room depressed him. It was like an airport departure lounge. And there was only one way out of it. Unless you counted the happy booth. Funny how it had been a Democrat President who’d legalized the happy booths. A *demographic adjustment*, they called

it. He couldn't really blame them, Bart and the rest. *Just too many old bastards like me, too few of them to look out for us, no decent jobs for them to do.*

Sometimes, though, he wished he'd just taken a T-38 up high over the Mojave, and gone onto the afterburner, and augured in on those salt flats. Maybe after Geena had died, leaving him stranded here, that would have been a good time. It would have been clean. A few winter rains dissolving that ancient ocean surface; by now you wouldn't even be able to tell where he'd come down.

Outside the light was flat and hard. He squinted up, the sweat already starting to run into his eyes. Not a shred of ozone up there. The home stood in the middle of a vacant lot. There was a freeway in the middle distance, a river of metal he could just about make out. Maybe he could hitch a ride into town, find a bar, sink a few cold ones. Screw the catheter. He'd pull it out in the john.

He worked his way across the uneven ground. He had to lean so far forward he was almost falling, just to keep going ahead. Like before. You'd had to keep tipped forward, leaning on your toes, to balance the mass of the PLSS. And, just like now, you were never allowed to take the damn thing off for a breather.

The lot seemed immense. There were rocks and boulders scattered about. Maybe it had once been a garden, but nothing grew here now. Actually the whole of the Midwest was dried out like this.

He reached the freeway. There was no fence, no sidewalk, nowhere to cross. He raised an arm, but he couldn't keep it up for long. The cars roared by, small sleek things, at a huge speed: a hundred fifty, two hundred maybe. And they were close together, just inches apart. Goddamn smart cars that could drive themselves. He couldn't even see if there were people in them.

He wondered if anyone still drove Corvettes.

Now there was somebody walking towards him, along the side of the road. He couldn't see who it was.

The muscles in his hands were starting to tremble, with the effort of gripping the frame. Your hands always got tired first.

There were two of them. They wore broad-rimmed white hats. "You old bastard." It was Bart, and that other one who was worse than Bart. They grabbed his arms and just held him up like a doll. Bart got hold of the walker, and, incredibly strong, lifted it up with one hand. "I've had it with you!" Bart shouted.

There was a pressure at his neck, something cold and hard. An infuser.

The light strengthened, and washed out the detail, the rocky ground, the blurred sun.

He was in a big room, white walled, surgically sterile. He was sitting up in a chair. Christ, some guy was shaving his chest.

Then he figured it. Oh, hell, it was all right. It was just a suit tech. He was in the MSOB. He was being instrumented. The suit tech plastered his chest with four silver-chloride electrodes. "This won't hurt a bit, you old bastard." He had the condom over his dick already. And he had on his faecal containment bag,

the big diaper. The suit tech was saying something. "Just so you don't piss yourself on me one last time."

He lifted up his arm. He didn't recognize it. It was thin and coated with blue tubes, like veins. It must be the pressure garment, a whole network of hoses and rings and valves and pulleys that coated your body. Yeah, the pressure garment; he could feel its resistance when he tried to move.

There was a sharp stab of pain at his chest. Some other electrode, probably. It didn't bother him.

He couldn't see so well now; there was a kind of glassiness around him. That was the polycarbonate of his big fishbowl helmet. They must have locked him in already.

The suit tech bent down in front of him and peered into his helmet. "Hey."

"It's okay. I know I got to wait."

"What? Listen. It was just on the TV. The other one's just died. What was his name? How about that. You made the news, one more time."

"It's the oxygen."

"Huh?"

"One hundred per cent. I got to sit for a half hour while the console gets the nitrogen out of my blood."

The suit tech shook his head. "You've finally lost it, haven't you, you old bastard? You're the last one. You weren't the first up there, but you sure as hell are the last. The last of the twelve. How about that." But there was an odd flicker in the suit tech's face. Like doubt. Or, wistfulness.

He didn't think anything about it. Hell, it was a big day for everybody, here in the Manned Spacecraft Operations Building.

"A towel."

"What?"

"Will you put a towel over my helmet? I figure I might as well take a nap."

The suit tech laughed. "Oh, sure. A towel."

He went off, and came back with a white cloth, which he draped over his head. He was immersed in a washed-out white light. "Here you go." He could hear the suit tech walk away.

In a few minutes, it would start. With the others, carrying his oxygen unit, he'd walk along the hallways out of the MSOB, and there would be Geena, holding little Jackie up to him. He'd be able to hold their hands, touch their faces, but he wouldn't feel anything so well through the thick gloves. And then the transfer van would take him out to Merritt Island, where the Saturn would be waiting for him, gleaming white and wreathed in cryogenic vapour: waiting to take him back up to the lunar beach, and his father.

All that soon. For now, he was locked in the suit, with nothing but the hiss of his air. It was kind of comforting.

He closed his eyes.

Stephen Baxter has two new books forthcoming from Harper-Collins this year: *Ares*, a novel about space flight; and *Vacuum Diagrams* (provisional title), a collection of his "Xeelee" stories, many of which appeared first in *Interzone*.

Sleepwalker Sleepwalker Sleepwalker Sleepwalker Sleepwalker

Brian Stableford

“**N**ever volunteer”, they say in the army – well, they say it in the poor bloody infantry, if not in the officer’s mess. It’s good advice in its way. What it means is *take no risks*, be satisfied with what you have, be it ever so humble. Except that progress requires risk-takers; it depends on the willingness of unreasonable men to be dissatisfied with what they have.

I’ve always been an unreasonable man. “Rather be wrong than orthodox” is what they used to say about me. I don’t know what they say now.

It didn’t seem like such a big risk at the time. I knew all about Jouvett’s research, of course, and I’d always been intrigued by it. Surgical removal of a body called the pons from a cat’s brain takes out the censor which switches off the motor nerves while the animal dreams. Pons-less cats act out their dreams; their sleep-life becomes manifest. It was obvious, of course, that the same effect could be obtained without actual surgery, if only one could learn the trick of it. People who talk in their sleep are acting out their dreams, after a modest fashion. Sleepwalkers are acting out their dreams, in a slightly less modest fashion. So it wasn’t that much of a shock when Spicer came to me and said: “We’ve figured out how to do it. Temporary chemical interruption of the censor in the pons. We can get people to act out their dreams in full – all we need is volunteers.” Which, roughly translated, meant: “How about it, sucker?”

I said yes. What’s so terrible about the thought that you might act out your dreams while being closely observed by a battalion of psychologists? After all, even if I dreamed that I was committing murder, I

wouldn’t actually be doing it. Jouvett’s cats dreamed of catching mice, but the mice weren’t actually there for them to catch – they were imaginary mice, entirely in the eye of the dreaming beholder. It did occur to me that there were things one does in dreams that might be slightly more embarrassing than committing imaginary murder, but in the cause of science one has to be prepared to suffer a little embarrassment now and again.

As things turned out, that wasn’t the problem. At least, it wasn’t the whole problem.

The most interesting thing that Jouvett’s research revealed, of course, is that feline dreams are so damned *sensible*. A cat’s dreams provide an arena in which instinctive behaviours can be practised and commonplace mental routines enhanced. Human dreams aren’t like that. Human dreams are much more bizarre and much sillier. One theory says that’s because humans don’t have very much in the way of inbuilt instinctive behaviour, and that the human dream arena is, in consequence, redundant inner space which has run to dereliction. Humans don’t need to rehearse inherited patterns of behaviour, so they just have this empty stage where all kinds of rubbish drifts around, accumulating in untidy heaps. Perhaps it’s true; I don’t know whether my own experience favours the hypothesis or not. I only know that it really doesn’t matter.

Spicer’s drug worked. It really did cut out the censor in the pons on a temporary basis, with no harm done – no physiological harm, at any rate. Unfortunately, the preliminary experiments with cats and rats didn’t show up one interesting side-effect that

was only applicable to humans.

Because of the way in which cats use their dreams, they need to remember them – mental rehearsal is no use if it's all forgotten. Humans not only don't need to remember their strange and silly dreams – it would be a positive disadvantage if they did. Humans, in consequence have a *double* censor built into the cytoarchitecture of the pons, which not only inhibits motor activity but memory as well. Spicer's drug switched off the whole thing. Not only were he and his team able to watch me acting out my dreams; I was able to remember them, in every detail, *exactly* as if they had been lived experiences.

When Spicer and the team first realized this, of course, they were overjoyed. After all, there's only so much you can learn about a dream by watching it being acted out. They only had half of every dialogue and they couldn't see the other entities to which I was reacting. To them, the memory retention seemed like an unexpected bonus – and it is. Perhaps it's more than a bonus; perhaps it's a great boon to humankind, or at least to that fraction of humankind which has the capacity to cherish its dreams and learn from its nightmares.

I used to have a life. One lousy, linear life. One incredibly straightforward, ordinary, *everyday* life. Not any more. Now I have a hundred lives, and a thousand more to look forward to. I used to be a citizen of the world, but now I'm a citizen of the multiverse. I used to be a glorified lab rat with only half a brain, but now

I'm a king of infinite space and I'm using my brain *to the full*. Of course I have bad dreams occasionally – who doesn't? – but even the worst of them can be savoured, knitted into life's rich tapestry.

These days, I can hardly wait to go to sleep, and the biggest bummer of every day is waking up. It's what I used to think of, in my pathetically narrow fashion, as "real life" which seems like a nightmare nowadays, because it's so dull and predictable and so utterly *banal*, like a mental rehearsal for death. Since my dreams became *real* experience, as tangible and meaningful as any other, I've become ten or a hundred times the man I used to be.

And that's why I can't understand why you want to take me off the stuff.

So what if I have been stealing from the store? So what if I have been sneaking off to take naps at every opportunity? Can't you see that I'm in pursuit of *real life* and that what you're trying to drag me back to is sheer hell? Can't you see that I'd do anything to preserve what I have now?

If you want my advice you can have it. "Don't knock it until you've tried it" is what I say. *Volunteer*. Do you want to be in the poor bloody infantry all your life?

Brian Stableford's current trilogy of science-fiction novels is being published by Random House/Legend. The first, *Serpent's Blood*, came out last year and was reviewed in *Interzone* 100 by Paul McAuley; the second is due imminently.

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I have been better able to cope with the wonderful world of sf since reading the penetrating "Customer Handling Tips" distributed to civil servants in my wife's office: "Recognize that some members of the public are mad which may influence their behaviour..."

THE DRAGON'S GRANDMOTHER

John Brunner's estate was valued at £251,472, according to the *Daily Telegraph*. The most vacuous obituary opening yet recorded was in *Folk Roots*: "Like so many non-professionals on the folk scene, John was an enthusiastic amateur."

Robertson Davies, who died in December aged 82, was of course a major author both in his native Canada and worldwide. Additionally, he was one of those quirky writers who without actually working in the fantasy genre (though deploying various angels, saints and spirits) have a strong appeal to sf and fantasy fans. I fervently recommend his "Deptford" and "Cornish" trilogies.

Lionel Fanthorpe bounced manically about the Swansea "UK Year of Literature" sf events in December – indeed, shaven-headed and clad in sinister evening dress, he closely resembled a bouncer. Having him as MC when giving a talk is rather like being allotted a high-volume laugh track. The organization was a little weird (what do you do when a million thirsty Terry Pratchett fans crowd into the building for a signing session? Close the adjacent bar, of course), and a large hole appeared in the programming since Bob Shaw had eloped to get married in Ypsilanti, Michigan. But dauntless Lionel replaced the Shaw "Serious Scientific Talk" with a medley of his own songs, including a heart-rendingly lyrical summary of the occasion: "Brian Aldiss, Terry Pratchett, / Colin Wilson and the rest, / All our Science Fiction writers / Rank among the very best. (Chorus.) Guy N. Smith and Andy Sawyer; / Ian McDonald – pleased to tell – / Freddie Clarke and David Langford / And Paul Brazier's here as well. (Chorus.)" Later verses drop the names of Pringle, Sneyd and Stableford, though I won't say in what.

Simon R. Green sniffs at the Copy-editor's Riposte to his complaints (see *IZ* 104): "Jokes about the severely disabled? Could this be my comment that one character's actions were as sensible as a leper playing volleyball? Gosh; I'm so ashamed.... The politically conscious Yanks didn't raise an eyebrow, and passed my book pretty much untouched."

Diana Wynne Jones enjoyed an epiphany at the Novacon convention when, after uttering the heartfelt cry, "God, this place is an *evil little labyrinth*!", she found the other person in the lift was the hotel manager. Actually this Birmingham hotel had a certain bizarre charm, thanks to its origins as a Victorian working men's dosshouse – tastefully recalled by plaques in the restaurant boasting that the walls' dour blue-and-white glazed bricks were a legacy of this room's intended function as (if I remember aright) communal delousing chamber.

Terry Pratchett issued mild, bemused groans upon learning that his books' occasional mentions of sinister black dogs with orange eyebrows had caused dedicated fans to form a Theory: that this refers to the newspaper story recorded in Charles Fort's *Wild Talents*, about the black dog with orange eyebrows which in 1908 said "Good morning!" to two Pittsburgh policemen and then vanished in a thin, greenish vapour. Mr Pratchett conveyed that he was merely alluding to rottweilers and suchlike; meanwhile, on looking up the Fort anecdote I found that it doesn't mention eyebrows. Another legend dies. (This was Fort at his most sceptical, by the way: "You can't fool me with that dog-story," he wrote, since although he could swallow the "Good morning" he drew the line at the thin, greenish vapour.)

Christopher Priest is extremely chuffed that his novel *The Prestige* has been shortlisted (along with novels by Anita Brookner, Kazuo Ishiguro and Ross Leckie) for the £3,000 James Tait Black Memorial prize, fiction division – "Scotland's oldest book award," winner to be announced before you read this. Meanwhile, true to his principles of Unreliable Narrative, he has once again rewritten *The Glamour* for a new US edition...

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

Pat Robertson, US born-again loon, recently burst into sf with his apocalyptic novel *The End of the Age* – based on the staggeringly original concept of a giant meteor hitting the Earth! In the drunker sf circles there is worried speculation that Robertson will be competing with Newt Gingrich for the John W. Campbell "best new writer" award....

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Ringpull Press, of Jeff Noon fame, was again cast adrift thanks to editorial disagreements between their chap Steve Powell and Fourth Estate – which last year rescued Ringpull from bankruptcy and took it aboard as a Fourth Estate imprint, but has now dumped it. "Editorially we were on different planets," explained Powell. Only three Ringpull titles appeared during the Fourth Estate era, as opposed to 17 in the previous independent year.

Savoy Books brag that their infamous *Lord Horror* by David Britton fetched £220 at the Index on Censorship Auction of Banned Books last November – outdoing first editions by Graham Greene and Salman Rushdie (who was also there, bidding for recordings of James Joyce reading his own stuff).

Philip? A correspondent courageously takes my life in his hands: "Next time you see Peter Morwood, ask him who Philip is, and then run away. Peter and Diane Duane's newest *Batman* animated show lists his first name as Philip, for some reason."

1946 Retro-Hugos for work published in 1945 ... since I mentioned these awards (to be voted this year) it has been pointed out that there might well be an evil British block vote in the non-fiction category, for H. G. Wells's last titles *The Happy Turning* and *Mind at the End of its Tether*.

Publishers & Sinners. On a personal note: there is something utterly characteristic of the wonderful world of publishing in receiving an editorial letter that begins, "Thanks for all your extraordinary hard work – the book is an absolute masterpiece!" and immediately goes on to talk about the sweeping rewrites that will be needed...

Thog's Historical Masterclass. BCA catalogue blurb for *Robin Hood: The Man Behind the Myth* by "peerless historical sleuths" Graham Phillips & Martin Keatman: "In mythology, aristocratic Robin Hood became an outlaw in Sherwood Forest when Richard I was crusading. This riveting book shares new evidence that Robin was a Wakefield peasant who lived 1500 years later ... And that's just the beginning of the revelations ..." (Ellipses in original.)